

Stolen Children and Monstrous Changelings (*Banemish*): Lilith as the Demon-Mother in Eastern European Jewish Manuscripts of Magic¹

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Abstract

A small number of East European manuscripts of magic and practical kabbalah enumerate recipes directed at disabling a specific function of Lilith focused on replacing or substituting a healthy human child with a disformed, physically, or mentally disabled demonic one. Designated by the Yiddish term, *banem* ביינעם (to replace or substitute), which appears in these manuscripts with an abundance of variant spellings exposing the influence of local dialects and diverse linguistic usage. As several recipes attest, the switching could occur either in utero or within a few weeks after birth. The wealth of magical formulas, designed to chain Lilith's power to carry out child substitution or replacement, reflect pervasive anxieties among Jews concerning the mental and physical health of newborns. In constructing effective charms and amulets against Lilith, Jews in Eastern Europe drew on general Slavic beliefs, hagiographic folk traditions, and herbal cures to which they added specifically Jewish traditional, kabbalistic, and magical elements. The chapter will trace six types of curative options: nature-based formulas; the use of divine and angelic names, amplified by the ten sefirot; historiologiae; diagrammatic-visual amulets; illocutionary speech acts; and combined formulas to highlight that concerns about children's wellbeing comprised a shared cultural-religious space between Jews and their Slavic neighbors and occupied a place of vital importance for the care and wellbeing of Jewish family and communal life.

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Of Adam's first wife, Lilith, it is told
(The witch he loved before the gift of Eve,) That, ere the snake's, her sweet tongue could deceive,
And her enchanted hair was the first gold.
And still she sits, young while the earth is old,
And, subtly of herself contemplative,
Draws men to watch the bright web she can weave,
Till heart and body and life are in its hold.
The rose and poppy are her flowers; for where
Is he not found, O Lilith, whom shed scent
And soft-shed kisses and soft sleep shall snare?
Lo! As that youth's eyes burned at thine, so went
Thy spell through him, and left his straight neck bent,
And round his heart one strangling golden hair.²

1. Lilith: Living on the Margins, Subverting the Center

Throughout the history of humankind, pregnancy has represented a time and condition of liminality. It constitutes creation in motion, when the embryo is developing, but is not yet fully developed. As a process of being and becoming, it signifies a process of perpetual formation yet signals a partial state and a place of danger as the embryo is not yet fully part of the living. The baby signifies a separate being, yet it is wholly dependent on, and still attached to, the mother. It eventually emerges in a human form, yet potentially carries the possibility of deviation and regression into non-human, animal-like features, as indicated by rabbinic debates in both the Palestinian and the Babylonian Talmud.³ It is this liminal status of being that is

² Dante Gabriel Rossetti, "Body's Beauty/Lady Lilith," in Rossetti, *Collected Works* (London, 1886), 216.

³ As David Shyovitz has noted, this discussion is couched in a halakic debate focused on the ambiguous nature of the embryo. The question is centered on a creature that has half-human and half-animalistic features. The rabbis contend that the face, not the body, is used to halakhically define the status of the embryo. Thus, if it has a human face, it is deemed human, even if the rest of its body is animalistic, as discussed in y. *Nid.* 3:2: "Rabbi Yasa said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan: '[A foetus] that is fully human, but with the face of an animal, is not a [human] foetus; [a foetus] that is fully animal but with the face of a human is a [human] foetus.' [A creature] that is fully human, but with the face of an animal, who is reading from the Torah—they may call to him and say, 'Come so we can slaughter you!' And [a creature] who is fully animal, but with the face of a human, that is pulling a plow in the field—they may call to him

exploited by Lilith—the demon queen in Jewish magical and kabbalistic mythologumena—in order to disrupt and sabotage the elemental process of creation and the organic development of a new human being. In this paper, I will trace this literary motif and examine the magical operations directed at neutralizing Lilith’s corrosive powers by focusing on apotropaic procedures and rituals drawn from the textual units of early modern Jewish books of secrets and magic written in Eastern Europe. These recipes—extant today in manuscript compilations found in libraries across Europe, Israel, North America, Ukraine, and Russia—while ostensibly displaying a set of common elements, nevertheless appear surprisingly diverse and varied, bearing the influence of local dialects and usage as well as borrowed motifs from the general non-Jewish cultural and religious milieu. Critical analysis of amulets, adjurations, and other magical procedures of the *banemish* type, which address the threat of changelings, constitutes a unique contribution to scholarship and is explored in the present article for the first time.

Some of Lilith’s pervasive features are ambiguity, liminality, and marginalized existence.⁴ While she is not explicitly named in the

and say, ‘Come and annul or contract a levirate marriage!’” On ambiguous categories of created beings, see further David I. Shyovitz, “Unearthing the ‘Children of Cain’: Between Humans, Animals, and Demons in Medieval Jewish Culture,” in *Monsters and Monstrosity in Jewish History from the Middle Ages to Modernity*, ed. Iris Idelson-Shein and Christian Wiese (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 163.

⁴ For a recent exploration of the mythical, mystical, and literary representation of Lilith and its connection to early modern Jewish magic in East-Central Europe, see Andrea Gondos, “The Female Body and the Male Gaze: Magic, Kabbalah, and Medicine in Early Modern East-Central Europe,” *Jewish Quarterly Review*, vol. 115 no. 1 (2025): 33–67. For more scholarship on Lilith, see Raphael Patai, *The Hebrew Goddess* (New York: Ktav, 1967); Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Schocken, 1996), 124–30; Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead: Basic Concepts in the Kabbalah*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel, ed. Jonathan Chipman, rev. ed. (New York: Schocken, 1997), 191–92; Scholem, *Devils, Demons, and Souls: Essays on Demonology* [Hebrew], ed. Esther Liebes (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute and Hebrew University, 2004); Scholem, *Gestalt der Gottheit: Studien zu Grundbegriffen der Kabbala* (Zürich: Rhein-Verlag, 1962), 186; Joseph Dan, “Samael, Lilith, and the Concept of Evil in Early Kabbalah,” *AJS Review* 5 (1980): 17–40; Howard Schwartz, *Lilith’s Cave: Jewish Tales of the Supernatural* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988); Nitza Abarbanel, *Eve and Lilith* [Hebrew] (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1994); Barbara Black Koltuv, *The Book of Lilith* (Lake Worth, FL: Nicolas-Hays, 1986).

Torah, rabbinic and kabbalistic writings identify her as having been co-created with Adam based on the verse *male and female He created them* (Gen 1:27).⁵ In stark contrast to the second creation narrative, which expounds the formation of Eve from Adam's rib (Gen 2:22), Lilith claimed ontological primordially and therefore equality with Adam, which resulted in her refusal to submit to his authority. God's anger and retribution are vividly portrayed in the apocryphal *Alphabet of Ben Sira*, where her punishments are enumerated.⁶ First, she is exiled from the land of the living and confined to the uninhabitable parts of the created world. Her existence is further restricted to the shadow world—she can destroy, but she cannot create; she can kill human children, but she can only mother demonic ones; she can seduce men in their sleep, appearing to them as a beautiful woman, but she cannot be a lawful wife, and her purpose of cohabiting with men is motivated by nefarious aims: to increase her shadow army of demons. On the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, in the scene entitled *Temptation and Expulsion*, the great Renaissance master Michelangelo Buonarroti depicted Lilith as a serpent coiled around the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, waiting to seduce the first couple.⁷

In medieval kabbalistic tradition, the *Zohar* identifies Lilith with the Edenic serpent and presents the emotions of seduction and desire as the means by which they carry out their primary function of diverting human beings from the side of holiness to the demonic “other side,” the *sitra aḥra*, to disseminate death, defilement, and pollution in the world:

The spirits and demons are all part of the spirit of uncleanness, and it has already been explained that the spirit of uncleanness that comes from the insidious snake [Lilith] is the real spirit of

⁵ See *Sefer ha-Zohar* 34b.

⁶ On Ben Sira, see Joseph Dan, “The Riddle of *Alphabet of Ben-Sira*” [Hebrew], *Molad* 23 (1966): 490–96; Eli Yassif, *Tales of Ben Sira in the Middle Ages: A Critical Text and Literary Studies* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1984); *The Alphabet of Ben Sira: Facsimile of the Constantinople 1519 Edition* (London: Valmadonna Trust Library, 1997); Frédérique Michèle Rey and Eric D. Raymond, *A Critical Edition to the Manuscripts of the Alphabet of Ben Sira With Translations and Philological Notes* (Leiden: Brill, 2024).

⁷ John K. Bonnell, “The Serpent with a Human Head in Art and in Mystery Play,” *American Journal of Archaeology* 21 (1917): 255–91. See also Shulamit Laderman, “Two Faces of Eve: Polemics and Controversies Viewed through Pictorial Motifs,” *Images* 2 (2008): 1–20.

uncleanness, and it has been given authority in the world to seduce mankind. Therefore, the evil inclination rules in the world, and has been given charge of mankind and is always with them. It comes to them with deceit and treachery in order to turn them aside from the ways of the Holy One, blessed be He. Just as it seduced Adam and brought death into the whole world, so it seduces mankind and causes them to become defiled, and whoever becomes defiled attracts the spirit of the uncleanness and becomes attached to it. There are many who are ready and prepared to defile him, and he is defiled (by them), and they defile him in this world and the next, and this has already been explained. But when a person is intent to purify the self, the spirit of uncleanness is humbled before him and cannot rule over him. Therefore, it is written, *No evil shall befall you, and no plague shall come near your tent* (Psalm 91:6). Rabbi Jose said: *No evil shall befall you*—this is Lilith.⁸

2. Between Slavs and Jews: Cross-cultural Perspectives on Changelings and Anxieties about Subversive Female Power

A small number of Eastern European books of secrets, typically the larger ones containing multiple thematically varied sections, enumerate recipes directed at disabling a specific function of Lilith: that is, changing, replacing, or substituting a newly born or yet-unborn child. In some instances, switching refers to the loss of a healthy (human) child, who is ostensibly replaced by a physically deformed, or mentally ill, (demonic) one. This activity is designated by a variety of cognomens derived from the Yiddish term *banem* ביינעם “to replace, switch, or change,” and appears with numerous alternative spellings across manuscripts arguably pointing to differences in local dialect and usage.⁹ As several recipes attest, the switching can happen either *in utero* or within a few weeks after the

⁸ Zohar 1:169a–b; see Isaiah Tishby and Fischel Lachower, eds., *The Wisdom of the Zohar: An Anthology of Texts*, trans. David Goldstein (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1989), 544.

⁹ Immanuel Etkes is one of the first scholars to note the usage of this term, which he designates as “‘replacing’ (*banemen* in Yiddish) refers to the snatching of an infant’s body; in place of the infant, the snatchers leave a sort of doll in the cradle made of straw and grist,” see Etkes, *The Besht: Magician, Mystic, and Leader* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2005), 9.

birth. From a social-psychological perspective, the theme of changelings and child substitution responded to individual and communal anxieties surrounding infant mortality, disability, or cognitive impairment, and appear as pervasive and recurring motifs in Western European Christian sources from the Middle Ages onward. These ideas were later adapted into Slavic beliefs and hagiographical folk traditions.¹⁰

When surveying Slavic beliefs on changelings, Ljubinko Radenković notes that these narratives ascribe the substitution to a diverse group of supernatural agents: fairies, witches, the devil, or some other dark mythical creature. Changelings can be recognized by their conformity to certain behavioral and physical traits: retarded postnatal development, hairy bodies, persistent crying, small or overly large heads, restlessness and bad temper, strange laughter, big eyes, unhealthy coloring, thin arms, and a lack of bones. The substitution usually occurs as a result of sins committed by the mother, or because a mother has temporarily abandoned a child and left it without her protection in order to tend to household chores, work in the fields, or gather firewood.¹¹ Demonic creatures are depicted as lying in wait, sometimes even positioning themselves on rooftops, ready to pounce on, and enter, a house, where they perceive sinful acts.¹² At the same time, changelings are difficult to discern for two reasons: first, they bear identical physical features to the original child, and second, they are cunning and attempt to hide their real identity. However, from time to time as they pursue clandestine activities, they make errors that expose their true identity. According to a tale from Poland, a mother who was unable to fall asleep one night saw her child rise in the middle of the night, “go to the larder, take a bit of rat poison, and throw some poison into the milk pitcher.”¹³ At that moment, the woman realized that the child could not have been hers, but was instead a changeling, who sought to poison the entire family. Stories recorded in diverse European communities—Germany, Hungary, Croatia, and Poland—mention parents ridding themselves of the changeling by throwing it into a large body of water, which enabled them to retrieve their rightful child. Perhaps due to their

¹⁰ Rose A. Sawyer, *The Medieval Changeling: Health, Childcare, and Family Unit* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2023).

¹¹ Ljubinko Radenković, “Slav Beliefs on Changelings,” *Balkanica* 32/33 (2002): 145.

¹² Radenković, “Slav Beliefs,” 146.

¹³ Radenković, 146.

ritual-symbolic and religious association with the baptismal font found in churches, bodies of water—lakes, streams, and rivers—were instrumental in overpowering the demonic and simultaneously repatriating the original child to its family and household.¹⁴ Tree branches and twigs were also frequently used to punish the changeling, stirring pity in the demonic mother and compelling her to release the real child and take back her demonic offspring.¹⁵

Parallel narratives and similarities in the general typology of motifs in Jewish and Christian accounts allow us to view recipes of the *banem* type involving adjurations against changelings through the speculum of social and cultural entanglements between the minority Jewish and majority Christian society in Eastern Europe. In this sense, Jewish books of secrets that circulated in this geographical region reveal a world that was not significantly isolated from the people among whom Jews lived. Thus, these sources express profound anxieties surrounding mental and physical wellbeing and an overwhelming concern for keeping the agents of disease, disability, and morbidity away from the newborn and the mother—the progenitor of a new life—and, by extension, from the household and the broader community.¹⁶ The pre- and post-partum periods in a woman's life were widely regarded as particularly precarious times, endangering the life of both the infant and the mother, and this

¹⁴ Radenković, 148.

¹⁵ The twigs and branches used in the exchange ritual were typically collected from hazel trees, dogwood, and birch and were dependent on local custom. See Radenković, "Slav Beliefs," 148.

¹⁶ In an important article, Elisheva Baumgarten highlights the proliferation of medical texts, particularly recipe books, that display a keen interest in the health of parturients and newborns, demonstrating that pregnancy, childbirth, and postpartum care were of genuine social concern in premodern Jewish communities. In addition, Baumgarten's careful analysis of the midwifery section of a medieval circumcision manual written by Jacob and Gershom ha-Gozrim in Worms also reveals important information about the collaborative work between circumcisers and midwives. She further highlights the entangled nature of the medieval medical marketplace, where Jews comprised pivotal members of the medical network that operated via shared sources of knowledge and techniques. At the same time, she argues, Jews retained their distinctiveness through the interpretive or hermeneutic framework that allowed them to embed contemporaneous medical advice within quotations from the Talmud and other Jewish texts. See Baumgarten, "Ask the Midwives: A Hebrew Manual on Midwifery from Medieval Germany," *Social History of Medicine* 32 (2019): 712–33, particularly 723, where she discusses the significance of the manual.

sentiment is reflected in the massive quantity of recipes recorded in Hebrew magical recipe books dedicated to supporting the female body through the various stages of pregnancy and post-partum care.¹⁷

In what follows, I will survey a variety of recipes drawn from East European manuscript sources of magic and practical kabbalah to trace the rich diversity of the changeling motif and reconstruct the plurality of treatments offered in these sources to protect the wellbeing of the family and broader Jewish community. Thematically, these recipes can be grouped into six broader categories based on the primary ingredients and apotropaic procedures utilized: 1) *nature-based elements* deployed either as primary ingredients or in combination with human body parts (such as hair and nails); 2) *divine, angelic, demonic names* in combination at times with the kabbalistic sefirot, adjured to act as shields for the wearer of the amulet; 3) *historiola*, comprising narratives that invoke the authority and religious power of Biblical or other sacred persons, such as the prophet Elijah or the angel Michael to overpower the sinister forces of Lilith and Samael respectively, who seek to harm a child; 4) *illocutionary speech acts*, that is incantations that build on ritualized speech in the form of prayers and adjurations; 5) *diagrammatic amulets*, that can take the shape of geometric figures, such as a magic square and the Star of David, or may appear as anthropomorphic, humanoid figures; 6) *combination cures* that work with integrating several magical tools and procedures in one recipe. Nature-based formulas were universally available and crossed cultural and religious boundaries leading to creative borrowings and adaptations by Jewish healers. Conversely, operations drawing on divine names, the kabbalistic sefirot, certain angelic or demonic names, and *historiola* based on Biblical or other sacred

¹⁷ On magical techniques for protecting the parturient and her newborn, see Chen Avizohar-Hagay and Yuval Harari, "Childbirth Magic in Amulets and Recipes from the Gross Family Collection," in *Windows on Jewish Worlds: Essays in Honour of William Gross, Collector of Judaica*, ed. Shalom Sabar, Emile Schrijver, and Falk Wiesemann (Zutphen: Walburg Pers, 2020), 335–50; see also Avizohar-Hagay, "Three Protection Amulets for the Newborn and His Mother to Ward off Lilith and Other Evils" [Hebrew] (MA thesis, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, 2015); Moses Gaster, "Two Thousand Years of a Charm against the Child-Stealing Witch," *Folklore* 11 (1900): 129–62; Abarbanell, *Eve and Lilith*; Shalom Sabar, "Childbirth and Magic: Jewish Folklore and Material Culture," in *Cultures of the Jews: A New History*, ed. David Biale (New York: Schocken, 2022), 676–79; Elliott S. Horowitz, "The Eve of the Circumcision: A Chapter in the History of Jewish Nightlife," *Journal of Social History* 23 (1989): 45–69.

personalities, connoted Jewish distinctiveness and emphasized the circulation and transmission of uniquely traditional modes of knowledge. Holiness evoked in some of the recipes, whether through a reference to scriptural figures or the use of esoteric concepts such as the sefirot, served to authorize and confer religious power to the efficacy of magical procedures.

In contrast to Slavic stories about changelings, these manuscripts aim to prevent the occurrence of harm to Jewish children rather than describe or recite actual events that may have happened in the community. We do not meet replaced-children on roof tops, in houses, or by rivers – instead, the context and goal are preventative. None of the prescriptions address what a *ba'al shem* was ought to do when encountering a changeling. The formulas were intended to avert harm before Lilith, Maḥalath, or their male counterparts Sama'el or Ashmedai, could strike.

3. Nature-Based Magical Formulas

A) Tree, Nails, and Hair to Prevent Changelings

The first recipe appears in *The Book of Longing* (*Sefer ha-Ḥeshekh*) written by Hillel Ba'al Shem. While the exact dates of his life is unknown, Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern has argued that he was a contemporary of Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer, otherwise known as the Ba'al Shem Tov (1698–1760).¹⁸ Hillel traveled extensively as an itinerant healer and *ba'al shem* trained in both medicine and practical Kabbalah, which encompassed the manipulation of divine, angelic, and demonic names. His travels took him to Podolia, Volynia, and Lithuania, but he also visited Romania, Bukovina, and Moldova in his early years. He finally settled in Posnan between 1739 and 1741, where he likely began writing *Sefer ha-Ḥeshekh*.¹⁹ With over 400 folio pages, it

¹⁸ Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern, “The Master of an Evil Name: Hillel Baal Shem and His *Sefer ha-Ḥeshekh*,” *AJS Review* 28 (2004): 217–248, on 221.

¹⁹ Petrovsky-Shtern's article mentioned in the previous note, provides to date the most comprehensive account of Hillel Ba'al Shem. On the Besht as a *ba'al shem*, see Immanuel Etkes, *The Besht: Magician, Mystic, and Leader* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2005). See also Gershom Scholem, “The Historical Figure of R. Israel Baal Shem Tov” [Hebrew], in Scholem, *Explications and Implications: Writings on Jewish Heritage and Renaissance* (Tel Aviv: 'Am 'Oved, 1975), 292–93; originally published in *Molad* 18 (1960): 335–56; Moshe Rosman,

represents a large, complex, and fascinating manuscript that is distinguished from the descriptive apodictic rhetorical style representative of the genre of Jewish magical recipe books by its engaging and colorful first-person narrative voice. Written in Hebrew, Yiddish, and occasional Slavic loan words, much of the introductory part of the manuscript is dedicated to establishing and buttressing Hillel's own authority and expertise by providing the reader with a detailed description of his studies. In matters of theoretical and practical Kabbalah, he presents himself as a disciple of Rabbi Zevi Hirsh, the head of the rabbinical court in Mezerich, who was widely recognized as an authority in halakah as well as theosophical and practical Kabbalah.²⁰ Hillel frequently notes that he has copied a certain amulet or recipe from Zevi Hirsch's own manual of recipes and kabbalistic textual units. In addition, he mentions periodic encounters with a kabbalist from Rozhnou (Bukovina),²¹ a celebrated preacher (*maggid mesharim*) called Ephraim whose manuscripts he claims to have consulted, and another prominent but anonymous kabbalist from Bessarabia (today Moldova).²² In this sense, the writing of *Sefer ha-Ḥeshekh* is closely intertwined with the personalization of knowledge that appears to form an integral part of the genre of recipe books. Compilers, in other words, display a great sense of creative freedom in how they select, adapt, incorporate, and

Founder of Hasidism: A Quest for the Historical Ba'al Shem Tov (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 11–26. On *ba'alei shem* as experts in practical Kabbalah, see Gershon Hundert, *Jews in Poland-Lithuania in the Eighteenth Century: A Genealogy of Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 131–59. On the activities of *ba'alei shem* as healers in early modern Germany, see Nimrod Zinger, “The Ba'al Shem and the Doctor: Medicine and Magic among Germany Jews in the Early Modern Period” [Hebrew] (Haifa: University of Haifa Press, 2017); Zinger, “‘Who Knows What the Cause Is?': ‘Natural’ and ‘Unnatural’ Causes for Illness in the Writings of *Ba'alei Shem*, Doctors, and Patients among German Jews in the Eighteenth Century,” in *The Jewish Body: Corporeality, Society, and Identity in the Renaissance and Early Modern Period*, ed. Maria Diemling and Giuseppe Veltri (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 127–56. On books of amulets, adjurations, and charms in the eighteenth century, see Hagit Matras, “Hebrew Charm Books: Contents and Origins, Based on Books Printed in Europe during the 18th Century” [Hebrew] (PhD diss., Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1997).

²⁰ As Petrovsky-Shtern notes, Hillel Zevi Hirsh was the son of R. Avraham, who was the author of *Torat Ḥayyim*; see “The Master of an Evil Name,” 225.

²¹ *Sefer ha-Ḥeshekh*, 189a.

²² *Sefer ha-Ḥeshekh*, 189a. See also Petrovsky-Shtern, “The Master of an Evil Name,” 225 n. 41, 42.

re-present visual elements, textual fragments, medical texts, amulets, and other textual and visual sources they encounter.

Hillel's formula foregrounds the syncretistic character of magic, whereby liturgical, material, and ritual elements specific to Jewish religious practice are presented in combination with ingredients and procedures drawn from the non-Jewish environment and the natural world. As I will show below, the recipe builds on medieval kabbalistic mythologumena concerning the relationship between body parts—nail clippings and hair—and their ontological connection to the other side (*sitra aḥrah*), or the realm of the demonic. At the same time, the specific deployment of natural elements, such as a hazelnut tree—a native species to the region in which this recipe was created and applied—contextualizes the recipe within the lived world that surrounded Jewish communities in Eastern Europe. It further expresses the contemporary belief shared by both Jews and their non-Jewish other that the pregnant female body was susceptible to the effects of evil forces and therefore required a syncretistic and integrated therapeutic strategy based on the combination of natural magic—the direct manipulation of the tree—with rituals derived from authoritative kabbalistic ideas and symbolism.

For difficulty in childbirth or *beinemish*, which affects a woman, God save us, whereby her child is switched during birth, or in the seventh month [of her pregnancy], later or earlier. When she is about to give birth, this woman should go to a tree that produces hazelnuts called *egoz luz/hayzin nislekh*—and whenever *egoz laz* (in contrast to *luz*) is mentioned or written in non-Jewish books, this [usually] refers to וועלסי נוס (a walnut?), [but] *egoz luz* is written without an *ayin*. She should stand there in front of the tree, facing it after it has produced its fruit. He should then make a hole with a new awl that a blacksmith has made solely for this purpose. He should take her finger and toenails, as well as some hair from the four corners of her head, [and] he should weave them together with the string, the measure of which should be the length from the top of her head to her toes. Then he should collect and place the nails and the hair in a white piece of paper and tie it with the string used above and place it in the hollow [of the tree]. Then he should make a peg from the bark of the hazel tree and strike the above-mentioned hollow with force, saying, “Just as the wood, hair, [and] finger and toenails cannot get out

of the tree, so evil infirmity, calamity, or injury is forbidden to ever enter and come close.” This recipe is good for a difficult pregnancy, epilepsy, and fever. The infirm one is permitted to say this in any language: the holy tongue, the vernacular, or Greek.²³

This passage is fascinating on several levels, not least in the wealth of details it provides about gendered bodily practices and ritual procedures to ward off demonic influences from the unborn child. One striking feature that emerges from this recipe is the window it opens onto the intersection between religion, myth, the body, and the natural world. On deconstructing the content, the specificity of the temporal element reveals a more nuanced understanding of the power of Lilith and other female demons, such as Agrath/ Igrat bat Maḥalat.²⁴ They specifically act at liminal times of the day, targeting

²³ Hillel Ba'al Shem, *Sefer ha-Ḥeshekh*, MS Kyiv, Verdnasky National Library of Ukraine, OR 178, f. 11a.

²⁴ Agrath bat Maḥalat is identified as the queen of demons in several places in the Talmud; see *b. Pesah*. 112b, “With regard to the instruction: Do not go out alone at night, as it was taught, [a person should] not go out alone at night, neither on Tuesday nights, nor on Shabbat nights, because [the demon] Agrat, daughter of Maḥalat, she and 180,000 angels of destruction, go out [at these times]. And [since] each and every one of them has permission to destroy by itself [they are all the more dangerous when they go forth together]”; <https://www.sefaria.org/Pesachim.112b.15>, accessed June 3, 2024. Agrat also appears in the Midrash, where she is identified with “the terror of the night,” an enigmatic expression that appears in Ps 91:5. Rabbinic discourse in *Num. Rab.* 12 is centered on deconstructing Psalm 91 in the context of anti-demonic procedures: “Rabbi Shimon ben Yoḥai said: The Holy One, blessed be He, gave a weapon to Israel with the ineffable Name written upon it, *You will not fear the terror of night* (Psalms 91:5)—Agrat bat Maḥalat and her chariot nor all the demons that rule the night.” See further *Num. Rab.* 12, Sefaria Midrash Rabbah 2022, https://www.sefaria.org/Bamidbar_Rabbah.12.3. It is worth noting that words and verses drawn from Psalm 91 are frequently deployed in Jewish amulets used for diverse apotropaic goals.

In kabbalistic texts, Agrat or Igrat appears alongside Lilith and Naamah in a zoharic discussion on Genesis (*Zohar* 1:55a). In this passage, she is depicted as an active and omnipresent female demonic force, only to be extinguished at a yet undisclosed point in the future, when God decides to blot out its ontological source, the *spirit of uncleanness* רוח הטומאה: “They do die, but Lilith, Naamah, and Igrat, the daughter of Maḥalat, who came from their side, will all survive until the Holy One, blessed be He, rides the world of the spirit of uncleanness, as it is written, *I will cause the spirit of uncleanness to pass away from the earth* (Zechariah 13:2).” See Tishby and Lachower, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 542.

men during their sleep at night, and prey on the vulnerable members of society—children and parturient women. The recipe instructs a woman to undertake this procedure at one of three possible time periods during her pregnancy: in the seventh month, between the seventh month and the birth of the child, or in the days or weeks following the birth. In contradistinction to more common conceptualizations of Lilith as attacking children after birth, here the danger already persists *in utero*. By the seventh month, the fetus is fully formed, with most of its vital organs—the brain, the lungs, the immune system, and the eyes—continuing their developmental process. Thus, the recipe suggests that child substitution can take place in the mother’s womb—a belief that may have helped to account for birth abnormalities and for children born with disabilities.²⁵ At the societal level, infants whose health and physical appearance were compromised from birth posed physical, financial, and emotional burdens on their parents and on the community at large. Equally applicable to both the medieval and the early modern contexts and beyond the religious divide, to Jewish and the majority Christian society, “changelings reflect the concerns of the society that produced them.”²⁶ In Jewish books of secrets, the discourse around changelings was constructed to incorporate magical procedures that would help to circumvent unnecessary burdens on the family and the community.

An examination of the technical components of the ritual reveals that the nature-based medium of a hazel tree occupies a prominent place. The author avails himself of translation in order to provide alternative names for this tree in several languages, revealing the technical difficulty of adapting names of flora and fauna from one cultural context and geographical region to another. Along with the tree, the female body plays a pivotal role in the operation, particularly its external parts—hair and nail clippings collected from the hands and feet.²⁷ The mythical and esoteric significance of human nails and

²⁵ For birth anomalies as presented in the Talmud, see Frederico dal Bo, “A Foetus Shaped Like a Sandal: Birth Anomalies in Talmudic Tractate Niddah,” in *Defining Jewish Medicine: Transfer of Medical Knowledge in Premodern Jewish Cultures and Traditions*, ed. Lennart Lehmhaus (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2021), 93–118.

²⁶ Sawyer, *The Medieval Changeling*, 3.

²⁷ On the magical use of nails in the East-Central European context, see the ethical kabbalistic treatise *An Honest Portion* (*Kav ha-Yashar*), which enjoyed broad

hair is explicated in both rabbinic midrash and the *Zohar*.²⁸ In the latter, nails signify vestiges of the garment that sheathed the primal couple, Adam and Eve, which was later stripped from them.²⁹ A zoharic passage stipulates the clipping of a woman's hair and nails as a form of "ransom of impurity" to the demonic side, which parallels the new moon offerings presented in the Jerusalem Temple in ancient times.³⁰ The woman, the text instructs, should collect her nail clippings, which should be bound with pieces of her hair, so that "he [Samael/the serpent/the demonic] will not go after her on the evil side to harm her, and he will separate from her on every side. And what will you do with the hair and nails? After you have wrapped them as one, you should place them in a place where no human being passes, or in deep hollows of the field, and store them there."³¹

The rabbinic worldview ascribes several common traits to the moon and the earthly woman: the cyclicity of the moon's movement from fullness to eclipse mirrors a woman's physiological oscillation between fertility and infertility as blood overpowers all her other bodily fluids. In the sefirotic system, the moon is identified with the final *sefirah Malkhut/ Atarah*, who is paired with her male consort, the *sefirah Tiferet*, mirroring the intimate relationship between the earthly woman and her husband. Times of lunar eclipse, the abundance of menstrual blood, and the attendant drop in the female body's fertility levels are further associated with larger mythical themes: demonic dominance in the supernal and lower worlds, which causes the proliferation of impurity and demands ritual procedures of

circulation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: Tsevi Hirsch Koidanover, *Kav ha-Yachar* (Stettin, 1864/65), 49–50, cited in Marek Tuszewicki, "Demonology at the Crossroads: The Presence and Significance of Non-Jewish Beliefs within Ashkenazi Folklore," *Scripta Judaica Cracoviensia* 13 (2015): 93–112.

²⁸ See *Gen. Rab.* 20.

²⁹ See *Gen. Rab.* 20:12, https://www.sefaria.org/Bereishit_Rabbah.20.11?lang=bi,accessed June 30, 2023.

³⁰ See Jeremy P. Brown, "The Reason a Woman Is Obligated: Women's Ritual Efficacy in Medieval Kabbalah," *Harvard Theological Review* 116 (2023): 422–46, especially 439.

³¹ *Zohar* 3:248b. I have slightly modified the translation from Daniel Matt, trans., *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition, Volume 9* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016), 626. Another text, "The Secret of the Fingernails," written by Moses de León, who was presumably one of the kabbalistic compilers of the *Zohar*, imputes this motif to the *Book of Enoch*; see Avishai Bar-Asher, "'Samael and His Female Counterpart': R. Moses de León's Lost Commentary on Ecclesiastes" [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 80 (2012): 539–66.

purification. The removal of pollution enables the moon and the woman to be returned to their respective husbands and to resume the pivotal act of creation and procreation in both the upper and lower realms of existence: “Just as on the first of the month, when the moon is purified to approach her husband, one portion must be given to the other side from its own kind, so similarly, a woman must give one portion of that kind when she is purified to approach her husband.”³²

However, while there is a clear procedural convergence between the *Zohar* and *Sefer ha-Ḥeshekh*, in Hillel’s formulation, the body parts—hair and nails—are placed into a tree, not buried in the ground. Both the tree and the earth, however, serve the same function of concealing and, in turn, neutralizing the nefarious effects of the demonic side. In *Sefer ha-Ḥeshekh*, everyday household objects—the awl, the string, and the paper—complete the magical ecosystem, where the natural, the domestic, and the cosmic coexist and complement one another. In the above passage against changelings, cooperation and partnership also extends to the relationship between the Jewish woman and the practitioner (in most cases, the *ba’al shem*). There is an interesting gendered rhetorical interplay between the actors, who acts when, and how the tasks are distributed. The woman must approach the tree, face it, and bring her nail and hair clippings with her. The male practitioner drills the hollow, measures the woman with the string, wraps the clippings in it, places it in a piece of paper, deposits it into the tree, closes it with a peg, and finally recites an incantation. The woman appears passive and voiceless, yet she is included as a participant, like the silent tree. Both tree and woman contribute parts of their material being to the procedure, yet they ultimately transfer operational control over the efficacy of the ritual to the male expert. Isomorphically, there is an additional parallel between the woman and the tree: evil is averted and transferred from the womb of the parturient to the womb or hollow of the tree, which,

³² *Zohar* 3:248b, based on Matt, *The Zohar*, 626, cited in Brown, “The Reason a Woman Is Obligated,” 439–40. On the theme of lacking and flaws in the moon and the woman, see Shifra Asulin, “The Flaw and Its Correction: Impurity, the Moon and the Shekhinah—A Broad Inquiry into *Zohar* 3:79 (*Aharei Mot*)” [Hebrew], *Kabbalah* 22 (2010): 193–251. On the topic of menstruation and its kabbalistic and mythic significance in the Middle Ages, see the superb study by Sharon Koren, *Forsaken: The Menstruant in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 2011).

in a surprising reversal, becomes pregnant with the corrosive and harmful forces of evil.

B) Herbal and Household Ingredients: Rue, Flour, and Dough

In another manuscript excerpt from an exceptionally richly illustrated and large manuscript of practical kabbalah composed in the Ukraine around the middle of the eighteenth century,³³ the writer draws on elements of the natural world and the magical deployment of the herb called common rue, רוטא (*Ruta graveolens*), to counteract Lilith and her demonic influence.³⁴ The practitioner is instructed to crush the rue with a ritually pure mortar. “While it is still moist, he should extract a drop from it. Then he should carefully place gold onto it and put the rue-drop in his mouth in such a way that no drop would fall without the gold resting on it and similarly no gold would separate from the rue-drop. The rue and the gold should be combined, and he should ensure that the drop reaches his throat. Then he should hang some of the above-mentioned rue plant on both the infant and the parturient.”³⁵

Continuing the use of raw materials, the next recipe on the same folio activates a common household ingredient, flour, in order to drive Lilith away from the home and prevent her from switching, or otherwise harming, the newborn. The practitioner is instructed to take some flour from nine women who have had their first intercourse with their husbands. “In the morning, before sunrise, he should go to the river and draw water with a waterpipe (*amat hamayim*) and not before the waterpipe. Then, he should cut the child’s finger and toenails and prepare a dough from the flour, then a ring from the dough, and while that ring lasts, rub the child [with oil?] once or three times, for three days, after which the ring can be given to a pig to consume.”³⁶ As part of a pluralistic inventory of therapeutic formulas, this recipe belongs to the natural and universal category of cures prepared with basic, easily available components: flour, water, and human nails. Time plays an important role in the recipe as the

³³ The manuscript was owned by William Gross before it was listed for auction. In the Gross Family Collection it corresponded to the shelf mark, Gross EE.011.039.

³⁴ It is interesting to note that the exact name of the plant has been added in the margins by another hand. The original recipe does not specify the genus of the plant.

³⁵ MS Bill Gross, EE.011.039, f. 87b.

³⁶ MS Bill Gross, EE.011.039, ff. 87b–88a.

water must be drawn before sunrise and the women must be at the beginning of their married lives, having already consummated a single sexual act with their husbands. The nail clippings in this ritual scenario are not hidden in paper and then buried in the trunk of a tree, but are rather incorporated into a dough, which, however, is not given to the child to eat, but becomes fodder for a ritually non-kosher animal, a pig.

C) Earth, Linen, and a Hemp String Recipe from a Sorceress in Prague

Lastly, the same compilation contains a recipe that was meant to save a child from switching (spelled בענימינש) “right after it [the baby] was born and while it was still lying on the ground. Take some earth from the ground below it [the baby] and tie it with a new linen garment, placing it on the baby’s neck, to be on it [the baby] until thirty days after the birth.”³⁷ Lacking identifiably Jewish elements—biblical verses, visual symbols, or Jewish ritual procedures—the operation is based on a variety of universally available nature-based ingredients that do not display any inherent magical qualities, such as earth taken from the ground and a piece of linen cloth. It is quite plausible that this cure may have been adapted from surrounding Slavic or other non-Jewish practices.

The same textual source reveals additional insights into the crowded marketplace of healers, where women competed against men in proffering protective amulets and cures for issues related to childbirth, focusing therapeutic concern on the infant’s physical health and mental wellbeing. Interestingly, this recipe is ascribed to a sorceress from Prague (אשה כשפנות בפראג), who revealed it to the writer calling it “a great secret (*sod gadol*).” The compiler does not specify whether the woman was a Jew or a Christian. Nevertheless, this allusion to an equally powerful female healer-magician deserves attention. Tucked between lists of instructions, this brief note reveals important information about social tensions and power struggles among healers that were influenced not only by religious divisions and divides, but also by gendered conflicts. Thus, while the Jewish male writer of the text tacitly acknowledges the authority of the anonymous and voiceless female healer, transforming her into an indirect author, he nevertheless takes ownership over the secret therapeutic formula by erasing the identity of the female therapist.

³⁷ MS Bill Gross, EE.011.039, f. 87a–b.

Her expertise clearly places her within the domain of the household, where the parturient resides and will give birth. In fact, the house as a ritual space—its rooms, windows, closets, and doorways—plays an indispensable role in the apotropaic formula. With the activation of the hemp string, parts of the house serve to demarcate protected areas and boundaries inside the household, where demonic powers are forbidden to trespass. In this context, the anonymous female healer is depicted as the source of a specific form of knowledge and practice, but her expertise remains oral, secondary, and mediated through the written record of the male expert.³⁸

In contrast to the previously explored recipes, this formula is meant to accompany the woman throughout a significant part of her pregnancy. Its placement—although not explicitly identified, most likely around the middle section of her body—bore strategic significance for the protection of the foetus. The combination of hemp and linen is mentioned in the Mishnah (*Kil.* 9:1–2) in connection with the prohibition of mixing and mingling wool with flax or hemp fibers in a person’s garment. Hemp and linen share several characteristic features: they are strong long-lasting natural fibers that absorb moisture and are excellent insulators. In their natural state, they appear similar—various shades of taupe, beige, and light grey—and it is difficult to differentiate between them. In ancient Israelite Temple rituals, linen was the fabric of choice for the high priest’s sacral service in the Jerusalem Temple, and it was also associated with royalty (*Esth* 1:6, 8:15). The recommendation of hemp rather than linen or flax in the recipe may reflect economic considerations, as hemp was generally less expensive than linen in premodern Europe.

Once she is pregnant, as soon as she feels the foetus, she will gird her flesh with a hemp (*kanabos*) rope several times. Preferably, this should take place in the room where she knows she will give birth. She must not remove the [hemp] strings from her body until she has given birth. Even in the bath, she should not remove

³⁸ On recovering and reconstructing women and household knowledge, see the pioneering study by Montserrat Cabré, “Women or Healers? Household Practices and the Categories of Health Care in Late Medieval Iberia,” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 82 (2008): 18–51. For Jewish women’s medical practice, see Carmen Caballero-Navas, “Virtuous and Wise: Apprehending Female Medical Practice from Hebrew Texts on Women’s Healthcare,” *Social History of Medicine* 32 (2019): 691–711.

them. After she has given birth, she should remove the string from herself and measure around [the perimeter of] the room at the *podwalina* [Polish for foundation]. If the string is not long enough to do so, it should at least be placed under the entrance to the room. If the room has several entryways, then it should be placed under each of them, as well as on the windows, the closets, and wherever there is an opening in the room. And this is a great secret that a female sorceress revealed [to me] in Prague.³⁹

This recipe does not contain uniquely Jewish elements; rather, it works with the general properties of an ordinary household—entrances and openings—that are to be protected by the natural ingredient of the hemp string, which also acts as an apotropaic device safeguarding the female body and the foetus lodged in it. It is noteworthy that the *mezuzah* as a protective device for the Jewish home is neither incorporated into nor invoked in the recipe. The source of the formula, a female, presumably non-Jewish, healer from Prague, is othered by the male *ba'al shem* by being identified as a biblically proscribed witch/sorceress based on Ex. 22:17 (using the Hebrew word כשפוּת), yet her knowledge is elevated to “a great mystery” and becomes incorporated into and therefore retrievable from the writer’s therapeutic handbook. Thanks to his recoding of this important detail, we gain a more granular understanding of early modern magical practice in East-Central Europe, where Jewish healers came into contact with multiple forms and sources of magical rituals, Jewish and non-Jewish alike, which they creatively adapted and recorded in their textual compilations.

4. Divine, Angelic, and Demonic Names and the use of the Kabbalistic Sefirot

A) Divine Names Used to Strike Lilith and Maḥalath

The next example derives from an eighteenth-century Eastern European manuscript written in Hebrew and Yiddish that is held at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. It is noteworthy that according to the *Ex Libris* pasted on the inside cover, the compilation belonged to the library of Mayer Sulzberger (1843–1923), a prominent

³⁹ MS Bill Gross, EE.011.039, f. 87b.

judge and communal leader in Philadelphia, who owned one of the best private libraries in America. His collection was renowned for its large amount of Hebraica and Judaica, together with many other early Hebrew printed books, including at least forty-five incunabula, and a rich collection of manuscripts. In 1904, Sulzberger decided to bequeath his library to the Jewish Theological Seminary, where he played an active role in its reorganization while also serving as its lifelong director.⁴⁰

In this densely written manuscript, among medical and practical recipes, we find several new ritual elements deployed against Lilith and Maḥalath, the latter identified here as a separate mythical being. The recipe involves writing thirteen sets of divine names that consist of double or triple letters, followed by three angelic princes (Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael), the word AMVN three times, the word SL six times, and finally the last two letters of the Tetragrammaton, the double letters *vav* and *heh*, ten times. The instructions that accompany the amulet outline the specific ritual procedure the scribe must undertake in order to ensure the efficacy of the procedure and avert danger from himself. This involves a forty-eight-hour fast and the completion of a ritual immersion in water at the end of each day. In the final step, the amulet is transferred from the practitioner to the parturient, from the man to the woman, where it is activated through physical, haptic, contact with her body. Presumably, the woman had to wear the amulet day and night for the duration of her pregnancy and up to thirty days after delivery, indicating the temporal period in which the harmful influences of Lilith and Maḥalath are at their height.

An important amulet for a woman to be saved from sorcery and against being struck by Lilith and Maḥalat and against other evil forces, from the time of her pregnancy until thirty days after the delivery of the baby. Write this name in great holiness and ritual purity fasting for two consecutive days and nights, with ritual immersion on each of these days, and write this name at the end of the second day close to the time of the afternoon prayer (*Minḥah*). And this is the great and awesome name: YH, YH, YH, HYN, HV, ḤY, ḤY, 'HYH 'ShR 'HYH, HVH, VH, 'H, Michael, the Great Minister (*Sar ha-Gadol*), Gabriel, Raphael, AMVN, AMVN,

⁴⁰ See Alexander Marx, "Mayer Sulzberger," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 29 (1925): 188–93.

AMVN, SL, SL, SL, SL, SL, SL, VH, VH, VH, VH, VH, VH, VH, VH, VH, VH. And these are exceedingly holy names; therefore, take care to fulfill all the conditions for the amulet to the best of your ability, not just for itself, but also because in the absence of proper [ritual] preparation, this amulet will not be effective at all, and in fact, will harm the writer-practitioner. For there is great danger in this matter, heaven forbid, and so he should conduct himself according to all the [ritual] procedures and laws for preparing an amulet. He should then hang it [on her] in a case.⁴¹

B) Angels to the Rescue: Seraphim, Sha'ananim, and Tarshishim

Returning to the topic of child-switching, the next recipe derives from a large eighteenth-century compendium of learned kabbalistic, medical, and magical collectanea preserved in the Gross collection. A noteworthy aspect of the amulet is that it is activated by a liturgical formula directed at explicitly entreating God's favor and mercy by dispatching three groups of angels as supernatural guardians to protect the child against switching. The *Seraphim*, or fiery ones, are mentioned and invoked in the daily liturgy as part of the *kedushah* portion of the Eighteen Benedictions (the Amidah prayer), along with two other angelic classes, the *Sha'ananim* and the *Tarshishim*.⁴² A notable

⁴¹ MS New York, Jewish Theological Seminary 2746, f. 48v.

⁴² The word *sha'ananim* most likely refers to angelic camps and indicates rest, calm, or complacency. The word appears three times in Scripture: Amos 6:1; Zech 1:15; and Ps 123:4. *Tarshishim* are mentioned in the *Zohar*, after references to the four ministering angels—Michael, Gabriel, Uriel, and Rafael—as the fifth among ten heavenly classes of angels: “*Erelim, Seraphim, Hashmalim, Shinanim, Tarshishim, Ofanim, Elohim, 'Ishim, Hayyot, bnei Elohim*”; see *Zohar Hadash*, Yitro 109. *Tarshishim* are also discussed in Elijah da Vidas's work *The Beginning of Wisdom*, in the section on emanated worlds. Here, they are enumerated as part of the world of Formation or *Yezirah*, associated with the angel Metatron. However, we find a slightly modified list compared to the one presented in the *Zohar*: “The world of *Yezirah* is called the world of Angels. The chief angel of this world is *Metatron*—The Prince of the Countenance (*Sar ha-Panim*). Under him are ten categories of angels as follows: 1. *Hayyot*; 2. *Ofanim*; 3. *Seraphim*; 4. *Cherubim*; 5. *Erelim*; 6. *Tarshishim*; 7. *Hashmalim*; 8. *'Elim*; 9. *Malakhim*; 10. *'Ishim*. As in the world of *Beriyah*, the *Hayyot HaKodesh*, the four faced angels of Ezekiel's vision also exist here, since his vision was perceived on the level of *Yezirah*”: https://www.sefaria.org/The_Beginning_of_Wisdom.9.16?lang=bi (accessed May 30, 2024). In yet another place, *Zohar*, Pinchas 32, the word *tarshish* seems to

element of this recipe is a subtle polemic directed against female practitioners of magic, designated in more general terms as witches or sorceresses, who ostensibly posed an economic threat to the male healer. The writer's terse note brings into sharp relief the broader question of how authority is mediated and enforced in the field of Jewish magic, underscoring the gendered aspects of this authority. In addition, it raises questions concerning who can authorize the production of magic objects and who constitutes an authoritative source for the activation of magic formulas. The amulet writer tacitly acknowledges here the presence of a crowded marketplace—replete with a variety of medical and magical options for combatting child-switching—where men and women were often placed in direct competition with one another for economic advantage.

Particularly for the care of the female body and its generative functions, female consumers were more comfortable with turning to female healers and wise women and seeking therapeutic treatments from them. Be that as it may, while we do not have magical medical books authored by Jewish women, this brief remark reveals the ubiquitous presence of female experts whose authority was strongly marginalized and undermined in documents written by male experts. The double diatribe levelled against female sorceresses who distribute anti-Lilith magical procedures on the one hand and the conflation of Lilith with contending female sorceresses who are portrayed as ostensibly embodying Lilith's functions of child-switching on the other hand foregrounds the social context of the recipe, where access to effective magic is intimately entangled with social and religious power < fig. 1 >.

An amulet for a parturient who is about to become a victim of child-switching, called *benomin* (בְּנוּמִין), either by the force of Liliths or female sorceresses/witches who possess the power to switch and substitute children. It must be written on a ritually pure (kosher) parchment, and you will find here the outline of the amulet, 'In your name, oh merciful Lord, YHVH, show forgiveness, compassion, and mercy to the woman N. daughter of N., who bears this amulet, and send your holy angels appointed over your gate of decrees and your gate of mercy, who

indicate a supernal body comprised of two sefirotic entities, *Gevurah* (judgment) and *Tiferet* (glory), which also form the divine name יאהדונהי, comprised of two names, the Tetragrammaton and Adonay.

are the *Seraphim*, *Sha'ananim*, and *Tarshishim*, for the sake of the power of holiness inherent in these holy names, 'YH, BYH, GYH, DYH, HYH, VYH, ZYH, HYH, TYH, YYH, KhYH, LYH, MYH, NYH, SYH, 'YH, PYH, TShYH, QYH, RYH, ShYH, TYH. May this hour when I write this amulet for a wife, whose name is N. daughter of N., be a time of divine will. May power be denied to all forces of Liliths and Maḥalat, along with their entire army, to switch or harm the fruit of her womb that will come from it, on the authority of this amulet and not on account of female sorceresses (ולא עידי נשים מכשיפות). May you [also] send your angels, your servants, appointed according to your decree over Liliths, and Agrath bat Maḥalat, whose names are *Senoy*, *Sensenoy*, and *Samengalof*.⁴³

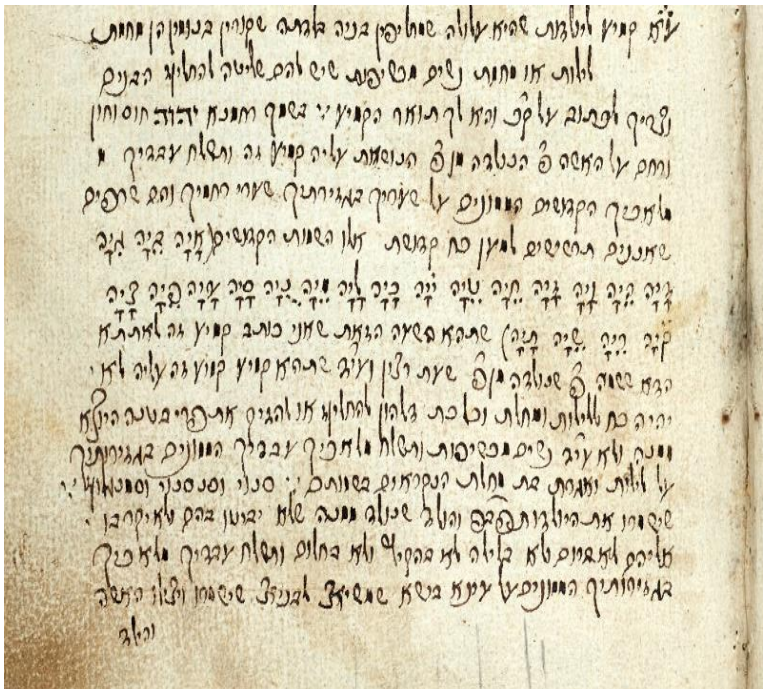


Figure 1. MS Bill Gross, EE.011.039, f. 88a. By permission.

⁴³ MS Bill Gross, EE.011.039, f. 88a. Thank you to William Gross for sharing the book with us and for permission to use this image. I express my gratitude to Prof. Gideon Bohak, and his team, for sharing their work on this important manuscript. This exact recipe also appears in the printed work, *Sefer Toldot Adam*, by Eliyahu ben Moshe Luantz (Wilhelmsdorf, 1734), f. 25a. An earlier edition of this work was printed in Zolkiew in 1720.

5. Historiola: The Magical Deployment of Biblical and Sacred Figures

A) Elijah-Lilith Historiola

The Prophet Elijah appears in a number of books of secrets as a recurring supernatural agent who is called upon to fight and neutralize the forces of Lilith. The next recipe < fig. 2 > builds on creative synthesis of three distinct elements drawn from the Jewish tradition: the Elijah-Lilith historiola, Jewish liturgy in the form of the Shema prayer, prescribed by Jewish law, and the use of a ritual object, the *mezuzah*—a piece of ritually fit parchment inscribed with biblical verses to be affixed on the right side of the doorposts of one’s house. That the *mezuzah*⁴⁴ was historically repeatedly discussed and deployed in apotropaic contexts as a protective amulet safeguarding the house and its inhabitants is attested in kabbalistic sources such as the medieval classic, the *Zohar*,⁴⁵ as well as in halakic works, such as Moses Maimonides’s *Mishneh Torah*, where he offers his unequivocal rejection of the use of the *mezuzah* for one’s own protection.⁴⁶ Maimonides polemicizes against the ostensibly prevalent custom

⁴⁴ The *mezuzah* is a Jewish ritual object affixed to the doorpost of each room in the house, except the bathroom or toilet, as well as to all entrances to the habitation. It is comprised of a parchment scroll upon which a scribe writes biblical verses taken from Deut 6:4–9 and 11:13–21. These verses include the Shema prayer, an integral part of the daily Jewish liturgy to be recited at least in the morning and evening, to which is added an additional recitation upon one’s bed, *Hear, O Israel, the Lord, our God, the Lord, is one!* (Deut 6:4).

⁴⁵ See Oded Yisraeli, “The *Mezuzah* as an Amulet: Directions and Trends in the *Zohar*,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 22 (2015): 137–61. For an overview of the magical deployment of the *mezuzah*, see Victor Aptowitzer, “Les noms de Dieu et des anges dans la Mezouza; Contributions à l’histoire de la mystique et de la Cabbale,” *Revue des études juives* 60, no. 119 (1910): 39–52; 65 (1913): 54–60.

⁴⁶ Moses Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Tefillin, Mezuzah and the Torah Scroll* 5:4, “The simple practice is that we write on the *mezuza* on the outside, opposite the space between one paragraph and another, ‘*Shaddai*.’ And there is no loss from this, since it is on the outside. However, those who write on the inside the names of the angels, holy names, a verse, or signatures, these are among those who have no portion in the world to come. For these simpletons, it is not enough for them that they invalidated the commandment, but they treated a great commandment—the unifications of the name of the Holy One, blessed be He, with His love, and His service—as if it is an amulet for their own benefit, as it arose in their hearts the foolish idea that this is something that will provide benefit with respect to the vanities of the world”: <https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/20004.6?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en>, accessed July 14, 2023.

both in Egypt⁴⁷ and among other medieval Jewish communities, such as the Ḥasidei Ashkenaz, whereby a basic, halakically appropriate *mezuzah* could be transformed into an amulet simply by adding angelic names, biblical verses, and magic seals and symbols.⁴⁸

The historiola < fig. 2 > presented within the narrative—a chance encounter between Elijah and Lilith on the road—reinforces the gendered aspects of a cosmic battle fought between the positive sacred male figure of the Prophet Elijah, depicted in the biblical book of Kings (1 Kgs 17; 2 Kgs 2) as a larger-than-life hero waging an epic war on God’s behalf against false sorcerers and prophets, and the powerful female demoness Lilith.⁴⁹ Curiously, careful reading of the biblical text reveals that while Elijah indeed fought the *ba’alim* or false sorcerers, his archenemy was ostensibly Jezebel, King Ahab’s wife, arguably one of Scripture’s cruelest and most cunning female antagonists. This literary context may have paved the way for the narrative framing of the amulet. In the myth analyzed below, Lilith is represented with particularly horrifying images as a repulsive flesh-eating monster and a blood-sucking female vampire satisfied only by the consumption of newborns, the most powerless and innocent members of society. Stories, like the Elijah-Lilith charm, recited in specific ritual settings can galvanize individuals and societies in

⁴⁷ It is noteworthy that a number of *mezuzot* with magic symbols and the addition of the Tetragrammaton have been unearthed from the Cairo Genizah, providing evidence of its deployment as an apotropaic ritual object. See Gideon Bohak, “*Mezuzoth* with Magical Additions from the Cairo Genizah” [Hebrew], *Dinei Israel: Studies in Halakha and in Jewish Law (Festschrift for Mordechai Akiva Friedman)* 26/27 (2009/10): 387–403.

⁴⁸ See also Joshua Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition: A Study in Folk Religion* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1961), 147–52; Daniel Sperber, *Minhagei Yisrael* (Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 2007), 96–123.

⁴⁹ For an excellent summary of the circulation and adaptation of the Elijah-Lilith historiola in both Jewish and Christian sources, see Susannah Heschel, “Lilith,” in *Encyclopedia Judaica, Second Edition*, ed. Fred Skolnik and Michael Berenbaum (Detroit: Macmillan, 2007), 13:19. She points out that Lilith in the *Zohar* is related to the planet Saturn, causing melancholy (*Ra’aya Meheimna* 3:227b). On similar salvific historiola when rabbinic sages act as supernatural agents in the Talmud, see the recently published monograph on the demonic in the Babylonian Talmud by Sara Ronis, *Demons in the Details: Demonic Discourse and Rabbinic Culture in Late Antique Babylonia* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2022), 171. On the use of Elijah’s chair in Jewish ritual contexts, see Channa Shacham-Rosby, “Ritual Chairs of Circumcision Ceremonies: Reassessing Meaning through Materiality,” *Images* 16 (2023): 90–108.

powerful ways.⁵⁰ Beyond affirming theological truths and conveying moral values, have the ability “to bring the power of the myth into direct application to a crisis situation” in everyday life.⁵¹ In the present case, the invocation of the meeting between Elijah and Lilith, serves to amplify the apotropaic propensity of the amulet against the dangers surrounding childbirth ensuring the survival of the mother and the newborn, or non-yet born, child. In the words of David Frankfurter, narratives are effective tools in a variety of religions across the world to attenuate and resolve existential crises and affecting physical, emotional, or spiritual cure.⁵²

The Elijah-Lilith historiola did not elude Gershom Scholem who, early in his scholarly career, dedicated a detailed analysis to the use of this narrative element in his review of Hans Alexander Winkler’s work *Salomo und die Karina* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1931).⁵³ After summarizing Winkler’s sources, which deal with various incarnations of this story in Greek and Byzantine texts, Scholem provided a taxonomy of the multiple names and incarnations of Lilith while also noting the diffusion of variant versions: in the Byzantine compilations, for instance, Elijah is replaced with King Solomon and the demonesses Abyzou or Sisionios appear as substitutes for Lilith.⁵⁴ Scholem further observed that in medieval Kabbalah, particularly in the mythical layers of the *Zohar*, the figure of Na’ama—the sister of the obscure biblical character Tubal Cain—was introduced and

⁵⁰ David Frankfurter, “Narratives that Do Things,” in *Religion: Narrating Religion, Macmillan Interdisciplinary Handbooks: Religion Series* (Farmington Hills, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2017), 95–106.

⁵¹ Frankfurter, “Narratives,” 101.

⁵² David Frankfurter, “Narrating Power: The Theory and Practice of the Magical Historiola in Ritual Spells,” in *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power*, ed. Marvin Meyer and Paul Mirecki (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 451–470.

⁵³ Gershom Scholem, “Review Essay: Hans Alexander Winkler, *Salomo und die Karina*,” *Kiryat Sefer* 10 (1934/35): 68–73.

⁵⁴ See Scholem, “Review Essay,” 69. An interesting early version of a child-killing demon called Smamit, who appears on a small silver Aramaic amulet (BMLJ 7052), is preserved in the Bible Lands Museum in Jerusalem. As Rivka Elitzur-Leiman shows, the amulet offers a new reading of the demoness Smamit, presenting her metamorphosis into a dreadful child-killer as occasioned by the deep sorrow and pain she felt after her twelve children were slain by the demon Sideros. See further, Rivka Elitzur-Leiman, “An Aramaic Amulet in the Collection of the Bible Lands Museum Jerusalem — A New Version of the Ancient Smamit Legend,” *Eretz-Israel: Archaeological, Historical and Geographical Studies* 32 (2016): 4–10 [Hebrew].

presented as the mother of all demons.⁵⁵ The story also appears in a seventeenth-century compilation, David Lida's *Sod Ha-Shem* (Berlin, 1710), in which a number of amulets and charms are appended to the end of the work.⁵⁶ Lilith, in Lida's composition, is identified with the Latin word *strīga* derived from the Greek *strīx* ("owl"), alluding to a vampiric, malevolent female spirit, a nocturnal apparition or nightmare, or an incubus. Lastly, *Sefer Toldot Adam*, a book of magic and practical kabbalah printed in Wilhermsdorf in 1734, also incorporates and cites this historiola in German translation.⁵⁷

A recipe for a child so it will not be forced by Lilith, God forbid: At the onset of labor, you shall whisper the verse of the *Shema* [prayer], *Hear, O Israel, the Lord, our God, the Lord is One!* (Deut 6:4), into the child's ear by reading the verse from the *mezuzah*.⁵⁸ Then you shall whisper [into its ear] the following incantation: 'Elijah, may he be remembered for good, met the star *Margaleah* and said to her, *Where do you go (lit. come from)?* She said to him, *To (lit. from) the house of N. daughter of N. where I will do evil deeds to the child [there], eating his flesh, and sucking from his veins, and if the child is female, he should say, from her flesh and her veins.* And Elijah the prophet said to her, *In the name of the Lord of hosts, יהוה צבאות שדי, who created Heaven and Earth; water, air, fire, and earth; the ten angelic hosts ('Ofanim); and the ten generations. In the name of your appointed angel, Samael and GRGRN, you shall have no permission to go into this house and, more so, to harm this child, neither its body nor any part of its soul (nefesh, ruah, neshamah).* You will say this three times and then you shall recite, *I shall lift my eyes to the mountains;*

⁵⁵ Zohar 76b, Parshat Aḥarei Mot.

⁵⁶ David Lida, *Sod Ha-Shem* (Berlin, 1710), f. 20a.

⁵⁷ *Sefer Toldot Adam*; see further Scholem, "Review Essay," 72.

⁵⁸ For the magical deployment of the *Shema* prayer and its abundant use in amulets and other magic objects, see the recently published work by Yuval Harari, "Between Magic and Practical Kabbalah: The *Shema* as a Performative Praxis," in *Hear, O Israel: The Magic of the Shema*, ed. Nancy Benovitz and Dudi Mevorach (Jerusalem: Israel Museum, 2021), 85–103. The entire volume is an excellent resource on the deployment of the *Shema* prayer for diverse apotropaic objectives. As its editors highlight, this biblical passage is usually the first prayer a child learns and the last one that a person recites before death. It is also intimately connected with martyrdom in Jewish history: see BT Ber. 61b.

from where will my help come? (Ps 121:1), etc., and afterward you should return the *mezuzah* to its place.”⁵⁹

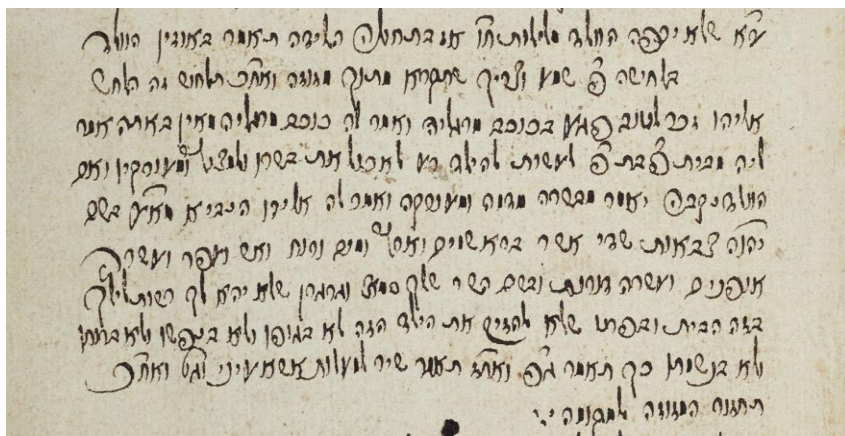


Figure 2. MS Bill Gross, EE.011.039, f. 87a. By permission.

B) Rabbi Elijah of Chelm and his Heroic Rescue of a Newborn from (Fe)male Witches

Continuing with the theme of changelings, the manuscript presents a highly dramatized historiola that aims to bolster the charismatic authority of *ba'alei shem* by invoking the heroic intervention of the sixteenth-century rabbi Eliyahu bar Aaron Yehuda of Chelm. One can read this story as a triumphant narrative of the sacred and sanctioned type of magic over the impure and unsanctioned one. The newborn Jewish boy appears in the narrative after birth, but before his

⁵⁹ MS Bill Gross, EE.011.039, f. 87a:

עא' שלא יכפה הוולד מלילית. חר' אז בתחילה הלידה תאמר באוזן הוולד בלחישת פ' שמע וצריך שתקרא מתוך מזוזה ואחכ' תלחוש זה הלחש אליהו זכר לטוב פגע בכוכב מרגליה ואמר לה כוכב מרגליה מאין באתה אמר ליה במית פ' בת פ' לעשות להילד רע לאכול את בשרו ולמצוץ ומעורקו ואם הוולד נקבה יאמר מבשרה מדמה ומעורקה ואמר לה אליהו הנביא מאע' בשם יהוה צבאות שדי אשר ברא שמים וארץ ומים ורוח ואש ועפר ועשרה אופנים ועשרה דורות ובשם השר שלך סמאל וגרגרן שלא יהא לך רשות לילך בזה הבית ובפרט שלא להזיק את הילד הזה לא בגופו ולא בנפשו ולא ברוחו ולא בנשמתו כך תאמר גפ' ואחז' תאמר שיר למעלות אשא עיני וגר' ואחכ' תחזור המזוזה למקומה.

Almost the exact same recipe is cited in Max Grünwald, *Mitteilungen der Gesellschaft für Jüdische Volkskunde* (Berlin: S. Calvary and Co., 1907), 126. I would like to thank Dr. Gal Sofer at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev for this reference. Grünwald identifies *khokhav Margalia* כוכב מרגליה as the planet Mercury, deriving it from the word *margulin*. However, it could also constitute a corrupt spelling of the Hebrew word for “pearl” or מרגלית indicating a gem that shines, perhaps in this case referring to Venus, which is the brightest light among the stars. *Sefer Toldot Adam* also incorporates and cites this historiola in German translation (Scholem, “Review Essay,” 72).

entrance into the Abrahamic covenant through the ritual act of circumcision. In this liminal state, he is depicted as being particularly susceptible to the power of demonic forces. Rabbi Elijah enters this epic battle to save a new member of the community. His weapons consist of everyday objects—knives, saws, shoes, and bread—which are elevated and activated by the magical procedure of pronouncing two divine names: one of lesser stature, which ostensibly did not require him to wash his hands, and a more elevated one—the Terrible Name—that demanded ritual washing. The placement of his right thumb over the little finger of his left-hand seals the procedure, indicating his complete corporeal involvement in the magic operation.

Rabbi Elijah is portrayed as belonging to the learned elites of Jewish society, occupying a position of respect as the head of the rabbinic court in the town of Chelm, while also serving a number of ritual functions in the nearby Jewish communities, as a circumciser (*mohel*) as well as a *ba'al shem*.⁶⁰ He therefore represents a different model of religious expert than Hillel Ba'al Shem, who was peripatetic and had to earn his living by traveling from one Jewish community to another.

For a baby who was switched, called *benomin*, based on an event that happened during the lifetime of the kabbalist Rabbi Elijah (Eliyahu), who was the head of the rabbinical court (*beit din*) in the holy community of Chelm.⁶¹ In a small town next to Chelm, there was a man called Rabbi Gabriel, whose wife bore him a son. He sent a messenger to the holy community of Chelm to inform the rabbi, the Ba'al Shem (Master of the Name), that he

⁶⁰ Chelm, as a town occupying a prominent place in the Jewish creative imagination as a topos in Yiddish literature and storytelling, see Ruth von Benruth, *How the Wise Men Got to Chelm: The Life and Times of a Yiddish Folk Tradition* (New York: New York University Press, 2016).

⁶¹ This is a reference to Rabbi Eliyahu bar Aaron Yehuda Mehalem (b. 1550), who was the head of the rabbinical court in Chelm, which is located in the south-east corner of Poland, in close geographical proximity to the Ukrainian border. Rabbi Eliyahu studied in Lublin at the yeshivah of R. Shlomo Luria; see Immanuel Etkes, *Ba'al ha-Shem: The Besht—Magic, Mysticism, Leadership* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 2000), 18 and 33. As Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern notes, Hillel Ba'al Shem also reproduced this historiola in his work *Sefer ha-Heshekh*, f. 44b. This story enjoyed broad circulation and was also printed in the practical kabbalistic compilation *Toldot Adam* (Zolkiew, 1720), *siman* 86. See Petrovsky-Shtern, "The Master of an Evil Name," 234.

should come to circumcise the boy, as the rabbi was a ritual circumciser (*mohel*). The name of the small town was Galink.⁶² This event happened in the month of Sivan on the fifth day, as R. Eliyahu went from his town to the city of Galink in the evening and approached the center of the city of Chelm, where he saw more than a hundred thousand male and female witches spewing forth fire and flame, and there were also burning fires around them as they were playing with the newborn child. When the rabbi saw this, he told his helper to give him water; he washed in the water and called out the great and terrible Name, but before he washed his hands, he called out a Name and had seven knives and seven saws brought to him, as well as two loaves of bread and seven shoes. Each knife was fastened to a shoe. He then threw his shoes away and washed his hands twice. After this, he raised the thumb of his right hand and placed it on the little finger of his left hand and proclaimed, “Behold, sorcery is now defeated, allowing men and women to beget children without any harm.”⁶³

The rest of the long recipe enumerates an extended list of vowelized divine names, which are depicted as having the power to annul sorcery for more than a thousand years due to their great sanctity and profound holiness. The recipe further states:

It was this divine name that enabled Rabbi Adam Ba‘al Shem to kill all the sorcerers, and he came and took the child, bringing it to its father and mother, and as he came before them, he called out the holy name ShMShYHV, and immediately everyone saw and understood that what was in front of the mother [i.e., the infant] was made of straw and only appeared to the eye in human form. Then he transferred some of the fire from the husks (*qelipot*) from the child to the mother.⁶⁴

The recipe concludes with an additional piece of advice in the event of a similar incident, prescribing that the awesome name mentioned above should be recited twice in order to restore the child to his

⁶² The name of the town, Galink, likely corresponds to גאליניץ Gliniany in the Lwów or western region of present-day Ukraine, in the border regions with Poland.

⁶³ MS Bill Gross, EE.011.039, f. 88b.

⁶⁴ MS Bill Gross, EE.011.039, f. 88b.

original state. However, if twelve hours have already passed before the child is rescued again, then it is not reversible. The writer concludes by ascribing the recipe and the use of the holy name to an age-old tradition passed down from one generation to the next (מאבותינו ורבותינו).⁶⁵

6. Illocutionary Acts: Spells, Adjurations, Prayers

A) A Spell (*Hashba 'ah*) to Bind Lilith and Other Demonic Powers

A rare invocation (*hashba 'ah*) to bind Lilith and other demonic powers is recorded in a large manuscript written in the eighteenth century and housed today at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem < fig. 3 >. The adjuration is activated by an illocutionary technical component, a swearing-procedure, where the magical practitioner pronounces and utters the spell to forcibly bind specific demonic forces that are enumerated in the passage. A unique aspect of this text is the repetition of the invocation four times introducing on the same page slight modifications and variant readings simultaneously. Visually, two shorter columns written side-by-side are encased between two elongated paragraphs at the top and bottom of the page. Three begin with the formula, “I make you swear an oath (*ashbaana ani alayikh*),” while the fourth one deploys the verb, “to decree (*ligzor*),” when commanding the demonic hosts:

I adjure you, Igrat (איגרת) the daughter of Maḥalat, or the Queen of Sheba (*Malkath Sheva*), or Lilith, in the name of God, the Lord of Hosts (*Tseva'ot*), who sits upon the cherubs ruling over supernal and lower beings, who dwells in the heavens above and in the waters that are below the earth, and [commanding] over all evil spirits (*shedin*), souls, and demons (*lilin*), and over all the angels of destruction, who fulfill His will throughout all the [created] worlds, *crushing* [creatures] *under His feet* (Lam. 3:34). I further decree upon you, Igrat the daughter of Maḥalat, or the Queen of Sheba, or Lilith, that God the Master over all rulers, should give you permission to go out and move about, hovering in this lower world on the fourth night of the week and on Sabbath nights that you should wield dominion and power to

⁶⁵ MS Bill Gross, EE.011.039, f. 89a.

carry out great things as your soul and will desire on these two nights [of the week].

With this I adjure you, Igrat (איגרת) the daughter of Maḥalat, or the Queen of Sheba (*Malkath Sheva*), or Lilith, in the name of the planet that rules over this night, called Saturn (*Shabbtai*) with its heavenly ruler, the great angel, *Sama'el*, and in the name of all the angels, that you send to me Igrat the daughter of Maḥalat, or the Queen of Sheba, or Lilith.

With this I adjure you, Maḥalat, or the Queen of Sheba (*Malkath Sheva*), or Lilith, who goes out and wanders around on this night, the seventh in the week, which is under the influence of the fifth planet, in the fifth firmament associated with the planet Mars, that rules over this night, and in the name of the guardian that commands and is stationed in the fifth firmament, who is called, *Asimor* (אסימור),⁶⁶ the great angel with all the other angels who serve him, that you bring to me Igrat the daughter of Maḥalat, or the Queen of Sheba (*Malkath Sheva*), or Lilith.

In addition, I decree upon you, Igrat the daughter of Maḥalat, or the Queen of Sheba (*Malkath Sheva*), or Lilith, who goes forth

⁶⁶ A marginal note next to the line reads, *Sama'el*, as an alternate for *Asimor*. The figure of *Asimor* is mentioned in the magical collection, *Sefer ha-Razim*, an eclectic assemblage of magical fragments from Antiquity that enumerates the structure of the heavens divided into seven realms and provides elaborate angelic taxonomies that populate the various domains. The angel, *Asimor*, is assigned to the first firmament:

The name of the first firmament is called *Shamayim*. Within it are encampments filled with wrath ... These are the names of the seven guardians, who sit on seven thrones: the name of the first is Orpani'el and the name of the second is TYGRH, and the name of the third DNHL, and the name of the fourth KLMYY', the name of the fifth *Asimor*, the name of the sixth is PSKR, the seventh is called BV'L. All of them were created from fire, and their appearance is like fire, and their fire is blazing, for from fire they emerged. And without permission, (the angels who serve them) do not go out to engage in magical acts, [they wait] until command comes to them from the mouth of one of the seven guardians sitting on the throne, who rule over them. For they are under their will and under their control. And each and every one of them goes to his work determined to act quickly in any affair on which he may be sent, whether for good or for evil, whether to increase or to diminish, whether for war or for peace. And all are called by names [given to them] from the day they were created.

Michael A. Morgan, *Sefer Ha-Razim, The Book of Mysteries* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1983), 21–22, I modified the translation slightly.

and wander about on this night, in the name of the seven planets which are, Sun, Moon, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, Saturn, and in the name of the holy and pure angels: *Rapha'el* appointed over the Sun; *Ana'el* appointed over the Moon; *Gavriel* appointed over Mars; *Hasadi'el* appointed over Mercury; *Barki'el* appointed over Jupiter; *Tsadki'el* appointed over Venus; *Micha'el* appointed over Saturn, that you should come to me, in your honor and by yourself and not by way of your messenger. May you speak to me as a person speaks to a friend without any fear at all. May you, your servants, and your messengers, give respect to the holy, mighty, and awesome Name, I have pronounced and adjured upon you. So come, come, come, *Igrat* the daughter of *Maḥalat*, or the Queen of *Sheba* (*Malkath Sheva*), or *Lilith*. Blessed are you to the Holy One, the creator of heaven and earth, may his name be blessed forever and ever, amen, and amen.

In addition to the adjurations, the scribe appended an abbreviation of four letters at the bottom of the page followed by the names of four months of the Hebrew year, *Nisan*, *Tammuz*, *Tishrei*, and *Tevet*. It is noteworthy that each of these months marks an important event in the Jewish yearly calendrical cycle. *Nisan*, with its corresponding festival of Passover, represents freedom, renewal, and redemption from slavery while also denoting the beginning of the religious calendar. *Tammuz*, constitutes the religious antithesis of *Nisan* according to biblical events, when the Israelites broke the covenant with God by erecting a golden calf during the wanderings in the desert. The month contains a minor fast day on the 17th day of the month commemorating the national tragedy when the Roman army breached the walls of the Jerusalem Temple which eventually paved the way for its destruction. *Tishrei* is the beginning of the Jewish New Year (*Rosh Hashanah*) as well as the time for counting the years, specifically the Sabbatical years (*Shemittot*, every seventh year), and the Jubilee years (*Yovel*, the fiftieth year after seven times seven years). Finally, the winter month of *Tevet* with its minor fast day on the 10th day of the month, recalls the destruction of the First Jerusalem Temple by *Nebuchadnezzar* and the Babylonian army.

The cosmic and talismanic propensities of the tetraptych adjuration formulae are reinforced by allusions to diverse planetary bodies and references to angelic interlocutors that reign on specific days of the week, months, and seasons of the year. Presumably each

of the four incantations was designed to be intoned by the practitioner at the corresponding time of the year in one of the four months mentioned above using the names of the relevant heavenly princes ruling at that time. Consistent in all four textual fragments is the gendered aspect of the formula: the male *ba'al shem* invoking God and male angelic princes to summon the demonic female entities, Igrat, Maḥalat, Lilith, or the Queen of Sheba, presumably referring to same demoness designated by alternative names. The swear-procedure was meant to shackle the female demonic queen binding her as a servant to the operator, the *ba'al shem*, to be deployed for a variety of practical operations, the details of which are not explicitly articulated by the text.

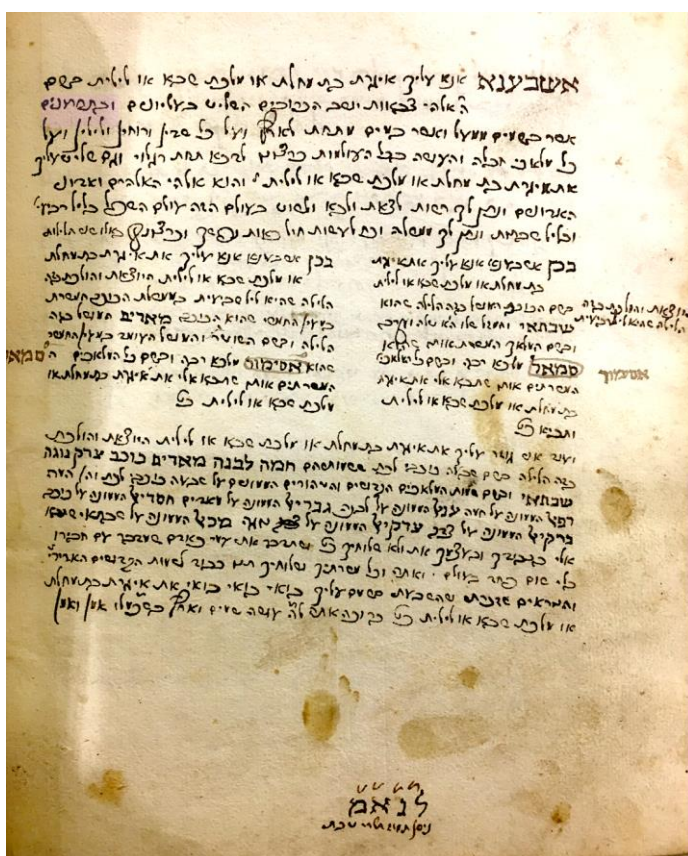


Figure 3. Israel Museum MS 180/017, f. 170b.

Special thank you to Associate Curator at the Israel Museum, Anna Nizza, who arranged for me to see this manuscript.

7. A Diagrammatic Visual Cure Against Lilith

A) A Humanoid Amulet Against Lilith and Her Armies

The next amulet < fig. 4 > is rich in visual imagery and is currently part of the manuscript collection at the Schocken Institute for Jewish Research in Jerusalem.⁶⁷ A square frame encases two parallel cells, the left side of which contains a paragraph of text and the right side of which depicts an unusual figure with words inscribed on its body. The anthropomorphic character stands with its hands thrown up into the air. Its face is inscribed with the divine name 'El, while the stomach or middle part of its body displays a biblical passage, *Oh Lord, pray heal her* (Num 12:13). The narrative context reveals Moses as the speaker in his famous petition to God on behalf of his sister Miriam, struck with ostensibly incurable leprosy for her slanderous speech against her brother. Moses's plea in this amulet is adapted into a magical-operational formula and serves an apotropaic function to protect and heal the woman who bears it, "*Oh Lord, pray heal the woman, N. daughter of N.*"

The lower part of the torso—curiously separated from the legs—bears three letters, *aleph*, *samekh*, and *nun*, sealing the prayer with the formulary *amen sela*. The legs and feet seem to suggest that the figure is wearing high-heeled shoes, perhaps an indication that the image depicts a female figure, a hint to Lilith, or to the three Lilith-repelling angels—Sanoy, Sansanoy, and Samengalaf—who frequently appear on amulets with bird-like features. The figure is certainly drawn with partly human and partly non-human features. Above the legs, we find inscribed the Hebrew letters *resh* and *shin*, followed by a prescription, "for a person, N. daughter of N.," which allowed the healer to customize it for each new female client. Above the humanoid figure, we find the names of the three angels Sanoy, Sansanoy, and

⁶⁷ This section originally appeared as "The Female Body and the Male Gaze: Magic, Kabbalah, and Medicine in Early Modern East-Central Europe," *Jewish Quarterly Review*, vol. 115, no. 1 (2025): 50-53. Reprinted with permission of Herbert D. Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jqr.2025.a952519>

Samengalaf, inscribed and encased in two rectangles that form a single visual unit with the anthropoid figure below.⁶⁸

The left side of the panel creates visual symmetry as the humanoid figure is replaced by a textual unit containing the following adjuration formula:

With the great and mighty name, with the name of these holy angels, I decree upon you, various spirits and forces of impurity, who come to N. daughter of N. in her dream and appear to her in the image of her husband or in the shape of another man to arouse (lit. heat) her body. I adjure you with the oath of Joshua, son of Nun, that no demon should come near her appearing in the image of a human being. May you guard and protect the woman N. daughter of N. from all fear and terror and from any form of pain, headaches, and anguish of the body—with all of its 248 limbs and 365 sinews—and may you cause her to bear male children, who do not die, by the power of these holy names that are inscribed herein, Amen Amen Amen.⁶⁹

This box is further framed by the names of seven angels, three above and four on the left of the square, in the following order: Argi'el, Sargi'el, Pargi'el; Rafael, Paḥadi'el, Padi'el, and Raḥami'el.

This adjuration formula presents an interesting counterexample to the more common recipes designed to offer protection to men against Lilith's charms. Frequently depicted as a beautiful woman in rabbinic and kabbalistic lore, Lilith appears to men in their sleep to steal their seed by causing involuntary seminal emission.⁷⁰ In the halakic system of the *Zohar*, as well as in Lurianic Kabbalah, the wasting of the male seed through improper intercourse from which a child cannot be naturally begotten (anal intercourse in contrast to vaginal intercourse, for instance) is designated as one of the gravest transgressions, which cannot be forgiven because "the [one who wastes his seed] kills his own actual children, shedding blood in

⁶⁸ For a visually different amulet—in the image of a bird inscribed with letters—intended for the protection of a parturient used in Iraqi Kurdistan, see Avizohar-Hagai and Harari, "Childbirth Magic in Amulets."

⁶⁹ MS Jerusalem, Schocken Institute for Jewish Research, Ms. 15927, f. 58a.

⁷⁰ On the contextualization of sexual emission in Lurianic Kabbalah and its later adaptation in prayer books and devotional manuals, see Patrick B. Koch, "Gathering the Dispersed of Israel: The Evolution of a Kabbalistic Prayer Addendum for *Tiqqun Qeri*," *Harvard Theological Review* 114 (2021): 241–64.

abundance.”⁷¹ In this passage, the *Zohar* speaks both actually and hyperbolically. When the male seed is not channeled in ritually acceptable ways—that is, through conjugal relations with one’s wife—it paradoxically does not go to waste, but instead gets acquired by Lilith. She then uses the appropriated seed to engender her demon-children, whom she dispatches with a mission to destroy or otherwise harm any future child this couple might have. It is in this sense that such sexually unsanctioned activity releases a chain of interconnected events preventing the natural birth of children as well as any future progeny by engendering demons, who will return to bring damage, pain, and destruction to the world of the living.



Figure 4. By permission of the Schocken Institute for Jewish Research, Jerusalem, Ms. 15927, 58a.

⁷¹ *Zohar* 1:219b. See Tishby and Lachower, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, 3:1366.

8. Combination Cures

A) Samael–Michael Historiola and a Magic Square for Miscarriage and/or Child-Switching

Hillel Ba'al Shem in *Sefer ha-Heshekh* devotes a number of folio pages to the intricate and complex issues that surrounded the birth of a healthy offspring which, he argued, demanded integrated treatment options. He held that therapeutic formulas had to address all stages of pregnancy from the fetal to the post-partum. In an interesting passage he attributes the cause of child-switching and miscarriage to the same root–Satan or Sama'el demanding its portion from the woman–and recommended an integrated approach comprising two magical procedures: a historiola narrating a chance meeting of the angel Michael, who overpowers the satanic figure of Sama'el, alongside the deployment of a magic square of five-by-five cells inscribed with Hebrew letters. Throughout the procedure, Hillel underlines the crucial element of time: the woman must ensure that she begins using the amulet from the onset of her pregnancy or she can potentially risk either miscarrying the foetus (*mapelet nefalim*) or losing it to switching (*banemish*). He further modulates the efficacy of his treatment by accounting for such factors as the sex of the child, the element of time (whether it was applied from the beginning of pregnancy or later), and the mental or emotional state of the woman (based on demonic visions or nightmares tormenting her).

During a chance meeting between the angel Michael and Sama'el, the satan, he (Michael) asked him, 'Why do children die in their mothers' womb?' He (Sama'el) replied, "Because I go and murder the child in its mother's womb." He (Michael) said, 'Then I adjure upon you in the name 'H 'HYH YH YHVH 'HYH 'ShR 'HYH 'NKTm PSTm PSPSYM DYONSYM YHVH Elohei Yisrael that you will not cause barrenness to this woman, and you will not destroy her, nor will you cause the miscarriage of the foetus in her womb. I will also adjure you not to kill the child and not to possess [the mother] N daughter of N from this day forward in the name, 'Ts KZ NSH BG H' YK ShT, blessed be the name of the glory of His kingdom forever and ever. [Also, in the name] 'SN 'SN 'SN NNNNNNNNNNN and in the name, YV''HTsTsBYRVN, blessed be the name, etc. He should also ensure that he observes all the laws of amulet writing as laid out in this book both in

preparation for it and after its completion, so it would be successful with God's help.

[This adjuration is helpful] For a woman, whose children die in her womb, or one that miscarries. It is crucial for its efficacy that the parturient should be given an amulet already when trying to get pregnant, so that by wearing the amulet she would be protected from the very inception of pregnancy. [If she only begins using it] once she becomes pregnant, the amulet loses all its efficacy and will not help at all during the months of pregnancy, because Sama'el the satan has already taken possession of the parturient, and her child, cleaving to them, intent on taking his portion from her body. This process is called a miscarriage if it happens during, and child-switching if it occurs after, the pregnancy, indicating that the child is replaced after birth. If it is a boy, then the switching can occur up to ten days, and if it is a girl, up to twenty days after birth, so it is necessary to instruct her to use protection against changelings [early in the pregnancy]. This expert amulet is potent as long as she has not seen a nightmare in her sleep, called *mar'in marvich* (מראין מארוויץ);⁷² however, if she had already seen one [a nightmare], then the amulet would lose its efficacy becoming null and void.⁷³

Hillel's philosophy of promoting therapeutic plurality as the preferred path to successful healing is evinced by his insertion of a five-by-five magic square immediately after the above adjuration to prevent child-switching. The cells of the square are inscribed by the first five odd letters in the Hebrew alphabet, ט, ז, ג, ה, א, appearing in consecutive order in the upper horizontal line yielding a sum of 25 both horizontally and vertically, while the middle nine cells add up to a sum of 21 and 23 < fig. 5 >. The use of odd numerals may build on an internal rabbinic tradition articulated in the Talmud, with a focused discourse devoted to this topic in Tractate *Pesahim* (109b–112a), where activities performed in even numbers seem to stimulate demonic

⁷² While there is no consensus on the exact meaning of this unique term and its multiple cognates in East-European manuscripts of magic, it denotes a demonic apparition, a nightmare. For an interesting discussion of this word, see the lecture by Elly Moseson, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T20RXXhnLNk&t=7139s>, Accessed on June 26, 2025. I would like to thank Elly for sharing this with me.

⁷³ Hillel Ba'al Shem, *Sefer ha-Ḥeshekh*, f. 36b (Hebrew pagination).

aggression towards human beings, while odd numbered acts attenuate such dangers.⁷⁴ The instruction that accompanies the diagram explains that it is,

... a small amulet, to be prepared by the practitioner on a kosher parchment. It is effective against the switching of children, called *banemish*. There is not requirement to include a [specific recipient's] name on this amulet, and for this reason it can be prepared in advance so that it would be ready for use when the necessity arises. It should be written on a new piece of white paper and then hung on a child's neck, or it is also effective [held] in front of the [child's] face, or placed on the [child's] body as long as it is prepared with at least a measure of holiness, purity, and ritual immersion, but there is no need for fasting.⁷⁵



Figure 5. Hillel Ba'al Shem, *Sefer ha-Heshekh*, MS Kyiv, Verdnasky National Library of Ukraine, OR 178, f. 37a⁷⁶

⁷⁴ See the baraita cited in tractate *Pesahim*, "One should not eat in even numbers, or drink in even numbers, nor wipe himself in even numbers, nor fulfill his [sexual] needs in even numbers." For a comprehensive discussion on the association between numbers and demonic danger, see Sara Ronis, *Demons in the Details : Demonic Discourse and Rabbinic Culture in Late Antique Babylonia* (University of California Press, 2022), 77–103, with the reference to the baraita on 77.

⁷⁵ Hillel Ba'al Shem, *Sefer ha-Heshekh*, f. 37a (Hebrew pagination).

⁷⁶ I would like to thank and credit Sofia Korn for sharing her photos of *Sefer ha-Heshekh* with our research group. She worked on the medical aspects of the manuscript, see further Sofia Korn, "The Manuscript of *Sefer ha-Heshekh* and Its Medical Advice" [Ukrainian] (M. A. Thesis, Kiev: National University of Kyev, Mohyla Academy, Department of History, 2020).

B) A Clay Cup with the Ten Sefirot, a Magen David, and Psalmic Verses

The ten *sefirot* used by kabbalists to conceptualize and visualize the divine and its dynamic inner life are invoked in the next formula designed to repel the evil eye and any form of injury from a boy or small child. The practitioner is instructed to take new clay directly from a potter, preferably unglazed clay, and to have the potter inscribe the Star of David (Magen David) on it in ink. Inside the Star, he should write the names of the ten *sefirot* together with the verse *Appoint an evil man over him, let an accuser (satan) stand at his right* (Ps 109:6). Using the technique of letter reversal, the words of the psalmic verse need to be reassembled and reunified in such a manner that הפקר becomes דקפה, and the writer is required to pursue this method for all seven words contained in the verse. Psalm 109 itself offers a fitting narrative context for the setting of the magic operation, as King David entreats God to divest power from his foes. He further asks God to curse his accusers, who are portrayed as a menace not merely to him, but also to society at large, particularly towards the vulnerable members of the community—the destitute.⁷⁷ The writer should also add the verse *No harm will befall you, no affliction shall approach your tent* (Ps 91:10), which is also to be inscribed into the diagram of the Star of David using the previous letter-reversal technique.

The further deployment of Psalm 91 is not a surprising choice as it constitutes a frequent intertext in magical adjurations and amulets against all types of disease and acts of evil. The final step of the recipe instructs the practitioner to have the child drink as much water from this clay vessel as is necessary to bring about the complete erasure of the magic diagram (the Star of David) with the name-lists contained therein. The ingestion of the diagram along with its linguistic elements activates the assimilation of visual symbol, language, and ritual into the child's body, acting as an internal shield against dangerous and negative external stimuli. The recipe concludes on a cautionary note to the practitioner to follow proper halakic and ritual procedures of sacred writing, conducting himself in holiness and ritual purity using square Hebrew script and crowns (*tagin*) to write the names.⁷⁸ This recipe exposes the incursion of kabbalistic nomenclature through the

⁷⁷ See the verse *because he did not take care to act kindly, and hounded to death the poor and destitute man, one crushed in spirit* (Ps 109:16).

⁷⁸ MS Bill Gross, EE.011.039, f. 88a.

deployment of the ten *sefirot*, which are comfortably embedded in the more traditional use of Psalmic verses inscribed into the image of the Star of David. Arguably, the presence of the *sefirot* intensified and added further apotropaic power to the recipe. Much to the reader's disappointment, the scribe did not include a visual image of the final magical object and left its construction to the imagination.

Conclusion

Jewish lives in the shtetl communities of Eastern Europe were rife with daily anxieties and crises. Intense preoccupation in Jewish medico-magical manuscripts with demonic personalities focused primarily on the mythical female figure of Lilith, but occasionally also on her male counterpart, Sama'el, discloses a world tittering on the brink between life and death. Narrowing the lens in this article on one specific function of Lilith, the switching and stealing of newborns or changing their identities already in utero (*banemish*) opens new windows for understanding that pregnancy and infant mortality in early modern East-Central Europe posed a shared existential crisis between Jews and their Christian neighbors. Stories centered around a female supernatural creature—Lilith, a demon, a fairy, or a witch—who wantonly enters houses to abduct human child from its mother and exchange it for one of its own circulated widely and transcended religious or ethnic boundaries. While Slavic legends tend to offer descriptions on how such a replacement occurred, the means by which changelings can be identified, and methods by which demonic children can be disposed, Jewish healers were more preoccupied with recommending preventative measures and procedures as early in the pregnancy as possible rather than waiting until the birth.

Circulating among the *ba'alei shem*'s prophylactic options against Lilith and the demonic side, we find elements that build on a combination of universal and widely available ingredients—flour, herbs, and other substances—while also drawing on the authority of specifically Jewish texts, biblical personalities, liturgical units, and ritual procedures. Some of the more universal apotropaic rituals, such as the manipulation of the natural world, as well as body parts and appendages—hair and nails—may have been widely dispersed among non-Jewish women and became selectively adapted, Judaized, and authorized by the writers of these recipe books. The protection of newborns, foetuses, and parturient mothers was an urgent imperative

in premodern times, embraced by all communities beyond religious divides. It was a place of liminality between life and death, individual and communal endurance, or discontinuity and demise. The wealth of diverse sources, techniques, and treatment options available to healers attests to the great demand in this area of Jewish life.

The recipes surveyed above also reveal that the category of magic was a site with fluid borders and boundaries representing a kind of cultural and hermeneutic crossroads, where religious boundaries could be decentered and traversed. The peripatetic lifestyle of Jewish healers, *ba'alei shem*, and other medical experts frequently brought them into contact with their religious others—Christians or Muslim Tatars—and their myths, stories, and repertoires of therapeutic options. Selective references to changelings, *banemen*, in a handful of Jewish magic manuals and recipe compilations vividly illustrate the influence of Slavic beliefs concerning malevolent supernatural entities—often gendered female—that target newborns, replacing them with straw-like or demonic children. Such occurrences among Christians were almost always attributed to a hiatus in religious observance—curses uttered by the mother or father, a child being left unbaptized or without the protective sign of the cross—often requiring a moral recalibration of the entire family.⁷⁹

Jewish formulas directed at averting bodily harm or causing any unseemly transformation in the foetus or in the newborn child, exposed the male healers' dialectical attitude to the female category in Judaism. Presenting Lilith as an antithesis of the ideal Jewish female, the writers of these books of secrets borrowed elements from a variety of biblical and rabbinic sources, including the Talmud, *midrashim*, and Kabbalah, and activated them using linguistic formulas containing angelic and divine names and an ecosystem of natural phenomena. The need for efficacy demanded experimentation, flexibility, and the adaptation of methods, but also an interpretative framework, such as the circulation of historiola that provided the religious-mythic framework for the rituals. East European books of secrets, in the final count, are loci of critical knowledge production—religious, natural, and technical—as well as social control, making it possible to resist the temptation to reduce them to a marginal position in the development of Judaism.

⁷⁹ Radenković, "Slav Beliefs on Changelings," 145–46.