

Dealing with Demons: The Magical and Rabbinic Ways

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Abstract

This article explores the differing attitudes toward demons in two corpora produced by the Jews of Babylonia in late antiquity: the Aramaic incantation bowls and the Babylonian Talmud. Both portray demons as destructive agents present in the human environment, responsible for mishaps, illness, and death. The bowls reflect a largely pragmatic approach—erecting barriers to prevent demonic intrusion, expelling them when detected, and, more rarely, deploying them against rivals through harmful sorcery. The Babylonian Talmud, by contrast, offers a far more complex discourse, expressed in practical guidelines and narrative accounts. From these sources emerge four modes of human–demon interaction: separation and protection, limiting demonic harm, subordinating demons to rabbinic authority, and cooperating with them. These modes rest on the rabbinic conviction—and serve to advance it—that all beings, demons included, fall within a divinely ordered moral system, one with clear principles, recognized representatives, and tangible consequences for the organization of worldly life. Thus, the single magical–technical strategy of the bowls is transformed in the Talmud into a multifaceted configuration of power shaped by rabbinic law, belief and authority.

Introduction

Two significant Jewish Babylonian corpuses have survived till now: the Babylonian Talmud and Aramaic incantation bowls. One reflects a cumulative process of discussions and disputations that engaged post-mishnaic rabbis (*amora'im*) in their houses of study in the third to sixth centuries CE. The other originates in the ateliers of charm writers active throughout Mesopotamia in the fifth to seventh centuries CE. The Talmud is a complex and varied corpus that prescribes every aspect of Jewish life and thought. The bowls, by contrast, are relatively simple, repetitive, and performative in nature. Although numerous (some 1,500 Jewish Aramaic incantation bowls

are known today), they focus on a very narrow aspect of reality—the wellbeing of specific men and women.¹ Each in its own way, the two corpuses represent the same (broadly defined) ethnic group—Babylonian Jews in late antiquity. This article is about their ways; that is, about the different ways in which these two corpuses confront a shared concern: the belief in demons and in their destructive effect on human life.²

Demons were a self-evident fact in the cosmology that was prevalent in the surroundings in which rabbis and charm writers grew up and developed their skills and worldview. In contrast to the picture that emerges from the Bible, where the presence of demons is relatively limited and marginal, sources from the Second Temple period attest to a growing interest in demons and to their increasing

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¹ For an overview of Aramaic incantation bowls and research on them, including a comprehensive bibliography, see Yuval Harari, *Jewish Magic before the Rise of Kabbalah*, trans. Batya Stein (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2017), 234–51.

² It is important to stress that although the Talmud does not explicitly mention the anti-demonic practice of incantation bowls, the interrelations between these two corpuses are manifest. See Avigail Manekin-Bamberger, *Seder Mazikin: Law and Magic in Late Antique Jewish Society* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 2024); Manekin-Bamberger, “Jewish Legal Formulae in the Aramaic Incantation Bowls,” *Aramaic Studies* 13 (2015): 69–81; Manekin-Bamberger, “Who Were the Jewish ‘Magicians’ behind the Aramaic Incantation Bowls?,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 71 (2020): 235–54; Manekin-Bamberger, “Healing and Protection in Rabbinic Liturgy and in the Jewish Aramaic Incantation Bowls” [Hebrew], *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 27 (2022): 87–109; Manekin-Bamberger, “A Jewish Magical Handbook in the Babylonian Talmud,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 29 (2022): 242–60, and her article in the present volume; Tal Ilan, “Rav Joseph the Demon in the Rabbinic Academy in Babylonia: Another Connection between the Babylonian Talmud and the Magic Bowls,” in *Let the Wise Listen and Add to Their Learning (Prov 1:5): Festschrift for Günter Stemberger on the Occasion of His 75th Birthday*, ed. Constanza Cordoni and Gerhard Langer (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 381–94; Shaul Shaked, “Form and Purpose in Aramaic Spells: Some Jewish Themes (The Poetics of Magic Texts),” in *Officina Magica: The Working of Magic*, ed. Shaul Shaked (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 1–30; Reuven Kiperwasser, “The King of Demons in the Universe of the Rabbis,” in *Demons in Early Judaism and Christianity: Characters and Characteristics*, ed. Hector M. Patmore and Josef Lössl (Leiden: Brill 2022), 273–93; Alon Ten-Ami, “Ashmedai in Babylonian Incantation Bowls” [Hebrew], *Peamim* 133/134 (2013): 185–208; and the studies on the magical *get* mentioned below, note 14.

significance in Jewish cosmology.³ This trend also continues later, and although demons were not theologized as offending God and the righteous in rabbinic Judaism (as they were in Christianity), their malicious presence was clear and demanded a human response.

Demonology is a very effective hermeneutical category. It provides an orderly explanation of pain and suffering and enables the individual to anticipate the demons' attacks and prepare for the struggle against them. In many respects, it is a far more convenient and appealing cultural justification than the alternatives—God's will, Satan's hit, or unfortunate coincidence. But this is an outsider's *etic* view. From an *emic* perspective, demons played a significant role in the web of life. Ancient Jewish sources, from the Second Temple period onward, show that this was indeed a major way in which Jews apprehended evil. Various post-biblical narratives—David playing his harp and chanting spells to expel the evil spirit tormenting Saul; Abraham laying hands on Pharaoh in order to expel the evil spirit

³ For a comprehensive study of biblical demonology, see Henrike Frey-Anthes, *Unheilmächte und Schutzgenien, Antiwesen und Grenzgänger: Vorstellungen von "Dämonen" im alten Israel* (Fribourg: Academic Press, 2007). Cf. Theodor H. Gaster, "Demon, Demonology," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1962), 1:817–24; Edward Langton, *Essentials of Demonology: A Study of Jewish and Christian Doctrine, Its Origin and Development* (London: Epworth Press, 1949); Karl van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter W. van der Horst, eds., *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, rev. ed. (Leiden: Brill, 1999); Armin Lange, Hermann Lichtenberger, and K.F. Diethard Röhmed, eds., *Die Dämonen: Die Dämonologie der israelitisch-jüdischen und frühchristlichen Literatur im Kontext ihrer Umwelt* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003). The research on demonology in the Second Temple period is extensive. See, e.g., Philip Alexander, "The Demonology of the Dead Sea Scrolls," in *The Dead Sea Scrolls after Fifty Years*, ed. Peter W. Flint and James C. VanderKam (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 2:331–53; Gideon Bohak, *Ancient Jewish Magic: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 88–114; Bohak, "Jewish Exorcism before and after the Destruction of the Second Temple," in *Was 70 CE a Watershed in Jewish History? On Jews and Judaism before and after the Destruction of the Second Temple*, ed. Daniel R. Schwartz and Zeev Weiss (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 277–300; Esther Eshel, "Demonology in Palestine during the Second Temple Period" [Hebrew] (PhD diss., Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1999); Ida Fröhlich, "Evil in Second Temple Texts," in *Evil and the Devil*, ed. Ida Fröhlich and Erkki Koskeniemi (London: T. & T. Clark, 2013), 23–50; Fröhlich, "Theology and Demonology in Qumran Texts," *Henoch* 32 (2010): 101–29; Harari, *Jewish Magic*, 295–310; Lange, Lichtenberger, and Röhmed, *Die Dämonen*; Michael J. Morris, *Warding Off Evil: Apotropaic Tradition in the Dead Sea Scrolls and Synoptic Gospels* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017); Andrei A. Orlov, *Dark Mirrors: Azazel and Satanael in Early Jewish Demonology* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2011).

from him; Tobias's struggle with Asmodeus in his bridal chamber; Noah receiving heavenly teaching about the ways of struggling with evil spirits; Elazar's exorcistic show before Vespasian and his companions; the exorcisms performed by Jesus—as well as *insider* sources such as the anti-demonic hymns and formulae from Qumran and (mainly later) magic material all attest to anti-demonic practices that were widespread among the people of Israel in ancient times.⁴

Rabbinic literature in general, and the Babylonian Talmud in particular, partake in this worldview and provide valuable information about demonic ways from within the house of study, though a careful distinction is required between the informative and the narrative approaches. The former includes instructions on how to avoid the harm caused by demons by exposing their ways, their preferred times and places, and the circumstances of their attack, as well as by supplying ritual—mainly linguistic—practices to be employed in the event of inauspicious meetings with them. These traditions are interwoven in the magical evidence of the time—amulets and incantation bowls whose sole objective, insofar as demons are concerned, is to remove them from the human sphere. The narrative approach, however, is entirely different. As I will stress, at the center of the talmudic *stories* about demons are not demons, but rabbis, and the spectrum of the relationships between these two groups is far wider than the exclusive attack-defense model found in the magical material.⁵ These differences reflect divergent views about

⁴ For an extensive discussion of *insider* evidence of Jewish magic in late antiquity, see Bohak, *Ancient Jewish Magic*, 143–350; Harari, *Jewish Magic*, 207–310. For the other sources, see the studies indicated in the previous note.

⁵ The stance underlying this article, which is founded on a generic distinction within the rabbinic demonological sources and a socio-political reading of the stories of sages and demons, has been suggested in the past in additional contexts: see Harari, *Jewish Magic*, 353–460. See also Yuval Harari, “A Different Spirituality or ‘Other’ Agents? On the Study of Magic in Rabbinic Literature,” in *With Letters of Light: Studies in the Dead Sea Scrolls, Early Jewish Apocalypticism, Magic, and Mysticism in Honor of Rachel Eilior*, ed. Daphna V. Arbel and Andrei A. Orlov (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 169–95. A similar conception has recently been suggested by Sara Ronis in her comprehensive and thorough study of rabbinic demonology: Ronis, *Demons in the Details: Demonic Discourse and Rabbinic Culture in Late Antique Babylonia* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2022), esp. 166–94 (“Serving the Rabbinic Project”). Cf. Ronis, “Space, Place, and the Race for Power: Rabbis, Demons, and the Construction of Babylonia,” *Harvard Theological Review* 110 (2017): 588–603; Ronis, “A Demonic Servant in Rav Papa’s

the place of demons in the world, which goes back to the question of their origin—Why are there demons in the world?

On the Origin of Demons

Jews in the Second Temple period answered the question about the demons' origins in two main ways. One response comes forth in the writings of the Dead Sea sect, most explicitly in *Serekh ha-Yahad* ("community rule") stating that the entire universe, including its dark evil side (headed by the Angel of Darkness, who is named Mastema or Beliya'al), is the manifestation of God's primordial thought.⁶ Later, this view also appears in rabbinic sources, in the formulation that the *mazikin* ("demons") were created at the end of the sixth primordial day, just before the beginning of the Sabbath (M^aAbot 5:6, *Gen. Rab.* 7:5). This conception, integrating the demons from the seven primordial days into the world as a result of God's will, is also at the basis of the *stories* about rabbis and demons in the Babylonian Talmud.

The second response is completely different. The first *Book of Enoch* and the *Book of Jubilees* link the existence of demons to the heavenly rebellion *against* the cosmic order set by God. I am referring to the expanded versions of the concise and cryptic narrative in Gen 6:1–4, whose very essence is the sin of hybridity—mixing what should not be mixed: angels and human beings, spirit and flesh, eternity and death. The result of this iniquity was the giants, who brought

Household: Demons as Subjects in the Mesopotamian Talmud," in *The Aggada of the Bavli and Its Cultural World*, ed. Geoffrey Herman and Jeffrey L. Rubenstein (Providence, RI: Brown University, 2018), 3–21. It is worth noting that the distinction I am proposing in this article is not between the two corpuses—the magic and the rabbinic—but between two *kinds of positions* regarding demons in late antique Judaism, which come forth in different genres. One kind, which seeks to separate and divide (or alternately, to coerce the demonic possession of the other for harmful purposes) is found both in apotropaic objects from Babylonia and the Land of Israel and in informative sections of rabbinic literature (including in shared conceptual and performative elements). By contrast, the other kind, which fundamentally involves subordination and domestication, comes forth in rabbinic *tales* about sages and demons that, in my view, have an entirely different purpose. As noted, the interrelationships between the two corpuses, which are discussed here beside one another, are considerable (see above, note 2).

⁶ See Florentino García Martínez, Eibert J.C. Tigchelaar, and A.S. van der Woude, eds., *Qumran Cave 11.II: 11Q2–18, 11Q20–31* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 1:75–77. This idea is further expressed in the War Scroll: see *ibid.*, 135.

corruption and destruction upon the earth and who were destined by God to kill one another. Their souls, however, did not perish. They remained on earth as evil spirits that “lead astray, do violence, make desolate, and attack and wrestle and hurl upon the earth and cause illnesses” (1 En. 15:11).⁷

According to this tradition, rather than being part of God’s creation plan, evil spirits were a foreign element that originated in heavenly sin and rebellion. But the chaos was not unlimited. The *Book of Jubilees* relates that when Noah prayed to God and asked him to destroy the evil spirits who had hurt his children, Mastema, their master, demanded that one-tenth of them be left under his command in order to exercise his authority on earth (Jub. 10:8). God acceded to this request, but by binding nine-tenths of them, he both limited and affirmed Mastema’s and his servants’ power to harm. Yet the evil spirits were unreliable and God suspected they would not abide by these constraints. He therefore commanded his angels to provide Noah with the heavenly knowledge that would serve to protect him and his sons from evil spirits and to heal their injuries: “And Noah wrote everything in a book [...] according to every kind of healing. And the evil spirits were restrained from following the sons of Noah” (Jub. 10:12–13).

Dealing with Demons: The Magical Evidence

Jewish magical sources reflect the idea that demons are hidden malicious entities that act on their own wicked initiative and thus that they can and should be confronted directly (and not only by praying

⁷ For the entire narrative, see *1 Enoch*, chapters 6–15. See also *1 Enoch* 19:1, *Book of Jubilees*, chapters 5 and 10. According to some of the traditions at the basis of this myth, the giants were themselves evil and harmful spirits. For a close reading of this myth, see Archie T. Wright, *The Origin of Evil Spirits: The Reception of Genesis 6:1–4 in Early Jewish Literature*, 2nd rev. ed. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013). For a broad discussion of it and its later appropriations, see Annette Y. Reed, *Fallen Angels and the History of Judaism and Christianity: The Reception of Enochic Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). This view about the source of the evil spirits will resonate later in a midrash in *Pirke Rabbi Eliezer* (34): “The generation of the Flood [...] all their souls become spirits and harm the Israelites further.”

to God).⁸ The *insider* evidence from late antiquity conveys a single strategy for coping with demons—confronting them and forcefully struggling with them so as to remove them. Pragmatic relationships between human beings and demons are thus confined to separation through binding and expulsion, by means of ritual power. The magic, *insider* evidence—incantation bowls, amulets, and anti-demonic recipes from late antiquity and the Byzantine period—all aim at this goal. They strive to prevent demons from injuring the body, soul, and life of the client (and usually also of his/her family and household) or to remove them when they appear to have gained possession. The Aramaic *qibla'* bowls, which were produced for overturning malicious sorceries against their sender, point to the practice of dispatching injurious spirits against one's rivals by magical means (below). Both the protective and the aggressive artifacts, however, share the view that any interaction between humans and demons is disastrous.⁹

The following examples—taken from Babylonia and Palestine—aptly illustrate this attitude.¹⁰ The first is an incantation in an Aramaic magic bowl. The magic genre of writing incantations on clay bowls that were then buried in the client's house was widespread in different religious cultures in fifth- to seventh-century Mesopotamia—among Jews, Mandaeans, Christians, and others. This praxis has received

⁸ Prayer, exorcism, and physical healing reflect three different views of illness that were apparently not viewed as mutually exclusive in ancient Judaism: (a) God strikes the sinner and heals the righteous (e.g., Exod 15:26); (b) demonic entities attack, penetrate, and possess human beings and harm them; and/or (c) material circumstances and physical imbalance generate illness. See Joseph Naveh and Shaul Shaked, *Magic Spells and Formulae: Aramaic Incantations of Late Antiquity* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1993), 31–39.

⁹ On the *qibla'* bowls, see Dan Levene, ““This is a Qybla’ for Overturning Sorceries’: Form, Formula—Threads in a Web of Transmission,” in *Continuity and Innovation in the Magical Tradition*, ed. Gideon Bohak, Yuval Harari, and Shaul Shaked (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 219–44; Levene, *Jewish Aramaic Curse Texts from Late-Antique Mesopotamia* (Leiden: Brill, 2013). Only in later magical sources do we find uses of demons for other purposes. See Gideon Bohak, “Expelling Demons and Attracting Demons in Jewish Magical Texts,” in *Experiencing the Beyond: Intercultural Approaches*, ed. Gert Melville and Carlos Ruta (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 170–85; Yuval Harari, “Demonic Dream Divination [Jewish Dream Magic II]” [Hebrew], in “Essays in Folklore and Jewish Studies in Honor of Prof. Eli Yassif,” ed. Tova Rosen, Nili Ariele-Sapir, Tsafi Zava-Elran, and David Rotman, special issue, *Teudah* 28 (2017): 187–232.

¹⁰ Cf. Shaul Shaked, “Incantation Bowls and Amulet Tablets: How to Get Rid of Demons and Harmful Beings” [Hebrew], *Qadmoniyot* 129 (2005): 2–12.

much scholarly attention in recent decades and the study of the bowls has included both their verbal and their visual dimensions.¹¹ Generally, the corpus includes about 2,500 clay bowls known today (located in museums and private collections throughout the world), among them about 1,500 written in Babylonian Aramaic in a dialect similar to that used in the Babylonian Talmud. These bowls are no different from the eating bowls of the period found in Mesopotamian archeological excavations, except for the incantations and images of demons written and painted upon them, which grant them their special character as performative objects.

Almost all of these bowls were produced for the purpose of defending clients against demons and expelling those who were torturing them.¹² This purpose was achieved by conveying the desirable

¹¹ Research on incantation bowls gained real impetus with the publication of the groundbreaking study by James A. Montgomery, *Aramaic Incantation Texts from Nippur* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Museum, 1913). For recent studies and an updated history of the research and publication in the field, see Harari, *Jewish Magic*, 132–40, 234–51; Shaul Shaked, James Nathan Ford, and Siam Bhayro, *Aramaic Bowl Spells: Jewish Babylonian Aramaic Bowls*, vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 1–27. On the writers of the incantation bowls, see Manekin-Bamberger, “Who Were the Jewish ‘Magicians’?” On the visual aspects of the bowls, see Naama Vilozny, “The Art of the Aramaic Incantation Bowls,” in Shaked, Ford, and Bhayro, *Aramaic Bowl Spells*, 29–37; Vilzony, *Lilith’s Hair and Ashmedai’s Horns. Figure and Image in Magic and Popular Art: Between Babylonia and Palestine in Late Antiquity* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 2017); Vilzony, “The Gender and Sexuality of Demons in the Art of the Aramaic Incantation Bowls,” in Patmore and Lössl, *Demons in Early Judaism and Christianity*, 294–318. See also Alessia Bellusci, “Oneiric Aggressive Magic: Sleep Disorders in Late Antique Jewish Tradition,” in *Demons and Illness from Late Antiquity to the Early Modern Period*, ed. Siam Bhayro and Catherine Rider (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 134–74 (on 163–73 and plates 9.5, 9.6, 9.7, 9.9); Bohak “Expelling Demons.” For Syriac and Mandaic incantation bowls, see, e.g., Marco Moriggi, *A Corpus of Syriac Incantation Bowls: Syriac Magical Texts from Late-Antique Mesopotamia* (Leiden: Brill, 2014); Judah Benzion Segal, *Catalogue of the Aramaic and Mandaic Incantation Bowls in the British Museum* (London: British Museum Press, 2000), 103–50; Edwin Yamauchi, *Mandaic Incantation Texts* (New Haven, CT: American Oriental Society, 1967). For the intercultural character of this practice, see Shaul Shaked, “Jews, Christians, and Pagans in the Aramaic Incantation Bowls of the Sasanian Period,” in *Religions and Cultures*, ed. Andriana Destro and Mauro Pesce (Binghamton, NY: Global Publications, 2002), 61–89.

¹² A few curse bowls and a handful of bowls for love, for gaining grace and favor, and for commercial success are also known. See Levene, *Jewish Aramaic Curse Texts*; Dan Levene and Siam Bhayro, “‘Bring to the Gates... Upon a Good Smell

situation in strong verbal and visual terms; namely, one where the possessing demons would be tied, chained, imprisoned, blocked, weakened, oppressed, controlled, and removed from the bodies and the lives of the clients (always mentioned in the bowls by theirs and their mothers' names) and their households.¹³ Bowl writers also drew on halakhic elements by appropriating the performative power of language in the legal context for use in the demonic one. For example, they exploited the coercive power of the language used in a testimony oath, which compels a person to testify to the truth of a damage claim in court, and, even more prominently, the idea of using the divorce deed that separates a wife from her husband and expels her for the purpose of removing demons from a client. In the latter context, the historiola of the *get* ("divorce document") that R. Joshua bar Peraḥia received "from overseas," through which he banned and expelled Lilith, recurs in many bowls.¹⁴ There follows an example of the language

and upon Good Fragrances': An Aramaic Incantation Bowl for Success in Business," *Archiv für Orientforschung* 51 (2005/6): 242–46; Montgomery, *Aramaic Incantation Texts*, 178, 213; Matthew Morgenstern, "The Jewish Babylonian Aramaic Magic Bowl BM 91767 Reconsidered," *Le Muséon* 120 (2007): 5–27; Ortal-Paz Saar, "An Incantation Bowl for Sowing Discord," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 58 (2013): 241–56; Saar, "A Study in Conceptual Parallels: Graeco-Roman Binding Spells and Babylonian Incantation Bowls," *Aramaic Studies* 13 (2015): 24–53.

¹³ An indication of the individual in the adjuration by his or her name and mother's name is typical of Jewish magic to this day. It also prevailed in Greco-Roman adjurations. See Jaime B. Curbera, "Maternal Lineage in Greek Magical Texts," in *The World of Ancient Magic*, ed. David R. Jordan, Hugo Montgomery, and Einar Thomassen (Bergen: Norwegian Institute at Athens, 1999), 195–203.

¹⁴ On the testimony oath in the Aramaic incantation bowls, see Dan Levene, "'If You Appear as a Pig': Another Incantation Bowl (Moussaieff 164)," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 52 (2007): 59–70. On the magical *get*, see Daniel J. Frim, "'And It Was in the Dwelling of Rabbi Joshua bar Peraḥiah': Notes on the Anti-Demonic *Get* in the Jewish Babylonian Aramaic Incantation Bowls," *The Review of Rabbinic Judaism* 18 (2015): 192–226; Dan Levene, "'A Happy Thought of the Magicians': The Magical *Get*," in *Shlomo: Studies in Epigraphy, Iconography, History, and Archaeology in Honor of Shlomo Moussaieff*, ed. Robert Deutsch (Tel Aviv: Archaeological Center Publications, 2003), 175–84; Avigail Manekin-Bamberger "The Contribution of the Babylonian Incantation Bowls to the Study of the Talmud and Its Time" [Hebrew] (MA thesis, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2012); Shaul Shaked, "The Poetic of Spells: Language and Structure in Aramaic Incantations of Late Antiquity, 1: The Divorce Formula and Its Ramifications," in *Mesopotamian Magic: Textual, Historical, and Interpretative Perspectives*, ed. Tzvi Abusch and Karl van der Toorn (Groningen: Styx, 1999), 173–95; Shaked, Ford and Bhayro, *Aramaic Bowl Spells*, 97–275. A historiola is a short story that is

of the bowls, joining together strong expressions of tying and roping and the mention of the magic divorce for the purpose of overcoming the demons, which includes the name Lilith. In the incantation bowls, “Lilith” is not a first name, but a generic one, indicating a kind of demon, of which there are many. A ban, like a divorce writ and adjuration formulas, must note the specific name of the addressee. The *historiola* in the following text focuses on this issue in the context of the mythical ban imposed on Lilith by R. Joshua bar Peraḥia. It reads:

[By] your name I make this amulet that it may be a healing to this one, for the threshold of the house [] and any possession which he has. I bind the rocks of the earth, and tie down the mysteries of heaven, I suppress them [], [I r]ope, tie and suppress all demons and harmful spirits, all those which are in the world, whether masculine or feminine, from their big ones to their young ones, from their children to their old ones, whether I know his name or I do not know it. In case I do not know the name, it has already been explained to me at the time of the seven days of creation. What was not disclosed to me at the time of the seven days of creation was disclosed to me in the deed of divorce that came here from across the sea, which was written and sent to Rabbi Joshua bar Peraḥia. Just as there was a Lilith who strangled human beings, and Rabbi Joshua bar Peraḥia sent a ban against her, but she did not accept it because he did not know her name; and her name was written in the deed of divorce and an announcement was made against her in heaven by a deed of divorce that came here from across the sea; so you too are roped, tied and suppressed, all of you under the feet of this Marnaqa son of Qala. In the name of Gabriel, the mighty hero, who kills all heroes who are victorious in battle, and in the name of Yehoel who shuts the mouth of all [heroes]. In the name of YH YH Sabaoth. Amen, Amen, Selah.¹⁵

woven into the incantation and functions as part of it. See 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, 1999), 457–76.

¹⁵ Naveh and Shaked, *Magic Spells and Formulae*, 158–63. Cf. the parallel in Shaked, Ford and Bhayro, *Aramaic Bowl Spells*, 140–43, and see more divorce texts there, 97–275.

Jews in Babylonia and in the Land of Israel shared a cosmology, including views on demons and the ways to struggle against them. Archeological findings, however, point to differences in the technologies they used to actualize the ritual power required to fight against demons. Judging by this finding, the technique of writing clay bowls did not wander westwards. A different practice was in use among Jews in the eastern shore of the Mediterranean, which also characterized that in use in the Greco-Roman world—engraving incantations on metal tablets.¹⁶ We do have two very early (fifth century BC) silver amulets (which are not anti-demonic), but the dating of most of the dozens of amulets available more or less overlaps with that of the bowls.¹⁷ Most were written to heal the harm caused by demons and other damaging agents. The following is an example of a text of this kind:

A song of praise to the king of the worlds [Y]H YH YH YHYŠ of the worlds, I am who I am, the King who speaks with distinct mysteries to every bad and evil-doing spirits, that you should not cause pain to Rabbi Eleazar the son of Esther, the servant of the God of heavens [...] In every place where this amulet will be seen, you, [the evil spirits] do not detain Eleazar the son of Esther. Should you detain him, you will be immediately cast into a burning fiery furnace. Blessed are you our Lord, the Healer of all

¹⁶ Note, however, that only artifacts made of non-perishable materials, such as metal or burnt clay, have survived. Magic recipes from late antiquity suggest other materials (such as papyrus, leather, leaves, bones, and so forth) as surfaces for writing adjurations, which charm writers undoubtedly used as well.

¹⁷ For the early amulets, see Gabriel Barkay, Marilyn J. Lundberg, Andrew G. Vaughn, and Bruce Zuckerman, “The Amulets from Ketef Hinnom: A New Edition and Evaluation,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 334 (2004): 41–71; Nadav Na’aman, “The Silver Amulets from Ketef Hinnom Reconsidered” [Hebrew], *Cathedra* 140 (2011): 7–18; Ada Yardeni, “Remarks on the Priestly Blessing on Two Ancient Amulets from Jerusalem,” *Vetus Testamentum* 41 (1991): 176–85. The study and publication of thirty-two amulets from Palestine and its vicinity by Joseph Naveh and Shaul Shaked was groundbreaking, and many more amulets have been published since. See Naveh and Shaked, *Amulets and Magic Bowls: Aramaic Incantations of Late Antiquity*, 2nd ed. (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1987); Naveh and Shaked, *Magic Spells and Formulae*. For a comprehensive survey of Jewish metal amulets from late antiquity, see Rivka Elitzur-Leiman, “Jewish Metal Amulets from Late Antiquity” [Hebrew] (PhD diss., Tel Aviv University, 2022). For a concise overview, see Harari, *Jewish Magic*, 216–33.

[people on] earth, send healing and cure Eleazar. BWBRYT TBRYT BŠT'RWT the angels that are [appointed] over fever and shivering, cure Ele[azar] by a holy command!¹⁸

The trend regarding demons found in incantation bowls emerges here as well—a desire to distance them from humans. As for the magic evidence conveyed in actual actions against demons, this is the dominant pattern.

The *qibla'* bowls attest to another pattern—dispatching demons and other evildoers to rivals. This harmful use of malicious spirits is attested in the language of these hatred bowls, which were meant to return the evil witchcraft charms to their sender and take revenge.¹⁹ For example:

This is a charm to overturn sorceries and vows and curses and spells and shofar bans and bans of the synagogue and an evil spirit and the mistress of HWWBYN' from Maḥlafta son of Batshiton against Mar-Zutra son of Ukmay and against his house and against his residence and against his threshold. [...] Appointed are all the sorceries of Jews and gentiles of men and of women and vows and curses and knocking and groaning and overthrowing and ruin and bindings of cemeteries, an evil spirit and a fierce spirit and bindings and idols and bindings of the synagogue and bindings of cemeteries and an evil spirit and wicked spirit, male and female and everything that was sent against him, Maḥlafta son of Batshiton, (that) they may be sent against Mar-Zutra son of Ukmay, may they be returned against him and against his heirs and inheritance and every name [of him] there is...²⁰

If, for the sake of protection, the various kinds of evildoers should be returned to those who sent them, it is clear that they were sent *ab initio* for harmful purposes. This is obviously the reversal of the separation and distancing trend reflected in protective incantations, but it is founded on a shared perception: interaction with demons entails calamity. An additional incantation bowl that is seemingly also

¹⁸ Naveh and Shaked, *Amulets and Magic Bowls*, 50–54.

¹⁹ On the term *qibla'* and the *qibla'* form, see Levene, *Jewish Aramaic Curse Texts*, 9–12.

²⁰ Levene, *Jewish Aramaic Curse Texts*, 117.

tied to the dispute we have encountered and which is meant to instill a harmful spirit into the body of Mar-Zutra son of Ukmay attests to the performance of this procedure. This is the beginning of the incantation:

This countercharm is to send a spirit against Mar-Zutra son of Ukmay. In the name of Qašpi'el the angel of death. I have adjured you, Infarat, the e[vil] spirit: go against Mar-Zutra son of Ukmay and dwell in him, in his body and his frame of Mar-Zutra son of Ukmay, and inflate his bowels like a bow and mix within him blood and pus, and sit like a bolt on his heart and like a load on his brain, and kill him after thirty days. [...] Go against Mar-Zutra son of Ukmay and cast him in exhaustion upon his bed, and do not give him bread to eat or water to drink until he shouts and neighs noise and howls; until his children despise him and his neighbors distance themselves from him. And cast down his strength, as fails that of a toiling ox, and remove his spirit from the two hundred and forty-eight organs of his body and kill him with anger and wrath and great fury.²¹

The two recipes that follow, which are included in the ancient magic treatise *Ḥarba' de-Moshe* (*The Sword of Moses*) in the category of aggressive charms, complete the picture:

If you wish to send an evil demon against your enemy, take a green locust and say over it from 'WBRYHW'L until QSGHNHW'L and tie to it (a piece of) wormwood and let it fly away.

To send a spirit, take a bone of a dead person and dust from below him [the person you wish to torture] (and put it) in a jar and tie it up in a (piece of) linen rug (together) with saliva and say over it from QSGHNHW'L until MRGHMHW'L, pertaining to his name, and bury (it) in a cemetery.²²

²¹ Levene, 119–20. Cf. Morgenstern, “Bowl BM 91767 Reconsidered.” This charm also defines itself as a *qibla'*.

²² Yuval Harari, “*The Sword of Moses* (*Ḥarba de-Moshe*): A New Translation and Introduction,” *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 7 (2012): 58–98 (at 96, sections 130–131). For another, much later recipe meant for this purpose, see Gal Sofer and Alon Ten-Ami, “Inserting a Demon into a Person’s Body as a Case Study for Aggressive Magic—Between East and West,” *Ginzei Qedem* 14 (2018): 55–66.

In sum, the available magic sources attest to a clear and uniform approach, which states that it is best for humans to avoid contact with demons and to keep them away altogether. This approach has two practical ritual expressions: above all, acts for ensuring protection against demons, controlling them, and removing them from the person's life and body; on the other hand, acts of hatred attempting to lower the barriers between humans and demons, sending the latter to the bodies and lives of others so as to destroy them. As shown below, the course of the relationship between demons and humans traced in rabbinic literature is more complex.

The Rabbinic Evidence: Between Praxis and Storytelling

The Babylonian Talmud is a multifaceted work that took shape in Babylonian houses of study in the sixth and seventh centuries CE, relying on a broad spectrum of traditions prevalent among hundreds of rabbis who had lived in the third to sixth centuries CE and covering a variety of literary styles, touching on almost every aspect of contemporary Jewish life.²³ It also includes the demons (*shedim*), evil spirits (*ruḥot ra'ot*), and harmful entities (*maziqim*) that, as noted, were central in ancient Jewish cosmology. General statements about them, such as “in all the years that Adam was under the ban, he begot spirits, and demons, and liliths” (*Erub.* 18b) or “a male hyena after seven years turns into a bat, a bat after seven years turns into a vampire, a vampire after seven years turns into a prickle, a prickle after seven years turns into a thorn, a thorn after seven years turns into a demon” (*B. Qam.* 16a), locate the demons *within* the order of divine creation (rather than viewing them as a disruption of this order).²⁴ Another tradition attests to their apprehension as intermediate creatures between humans and angels:

²³ On the creation of the Babylonian Talmud, see Moulie Vidas, *Tradition and the Formation of the Talmud* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2014), 1–19 (with comprehensive bibliography). Cf. the diverse approaches in Jacob Neusner, ed., *The Formation of the Babylonian Talmud: Studies in the Achievements of Late Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Historical and Literary-Critical Research* (Leiden: Brill, 1970). The following discussion will focus on the Babylonian Talmud, and unless indicated otherwise, references are to its tractates.

²⁴ For other rabbinic opinions concerning the origin of demons, see Harari, *Jewish Magic*, 392–93. See also the discussion on “origin stories” of demons in Ronis, *Demons in the Details*, 29–55.

Six things are said concerning demons—three [claim they are] like the ministering angels, and three [claim they are] like human beings. Three like the ministering angels: they have wings like the ministering angels, and they fly from one end of the world to the other like the ministering angels; and they know what will happen like the ministering angels [...]. And three like human beings: they eat and drink like human beings, they propagate like human beings, and they die like human beings (*Hag. 16a*).²⁵

Still others emphasize the constant threat represented by their hidden presence in human surroundings. For example:

Abba Benjamin says: “If the eye were allowed to see them, no creature could confront the demons.” Abaye said: “They are more than we are and they surround us like mounds of earth around a pit.” R. Huna said: “Every single one among us has a thousand of them on his left and ten thousand on his right” (*Ber. 6a*).

Nevertheless, the Babylonian Talmud does not dismiss the demonic threat with a directive to keep away from demons or with instructions on how to remove them. This is only one of the options considered in the Talmud, and alongside it, through various sayings and stories, it traces a far more complex pattern of relationships between humans and demons.²⁶

²⁵ Cf. *Abot R. Nat. A 37*, where evil spirits are placed between trees and beasts. For comparative discussions of the essence and nature of demons in rabbinic sources, see Ronis, *Demons in the Details*, 56–91. Cf. Ronis, “A Seven-Headed Demon in the House of Study: Understanding a Rabbinic Demon in Light of Zoroastrian, Christian, and Babylonian Textual Traditions,” *Association for Jewish Studies Review* 43 (2019): 125–42.

²⁶ A great deal has been written on rabbinic demonology. For a recent comprehensive study, see Ronis, *Demons in the Details*. A few more major studies (with further bibliography) are Gideon Bohak, “Conceptualizing Demons in Late Antique Judaism,” in Bhayro and Rider, *Demons and Illness*, 111–33; Harari, *Jewish Magic*, 386–407; Ruben Knoll, “Demonology in the Literature of the Sages: The Demons and Their Characteristics” [Hebrew] (MA thesis. Tel Aviv University, 2005); Hermann L. Strack and Paul Billerbeck, “Zur altjüdischen Dämonologie,” in Strack and Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch, 4.1: Exkurse zu einzelnen Stellen des Neuen Testaments; Abhandlungen zur neutestamentlichen Theologie und Archäologie* (Munich: Beck,

Four major variations of this pattern can be detected in the Talmud, sometimes mutually interwoven: (a) separation and defense—avoiding places where demons have settled and deeds that may result in injury from them and performing ritual acts of protection when afflicted by them; (b) setting a time and place for injurious demonic activity; (c) controlling demons by domesticating them and subjugating them to human legalistic norms and authority; and (d) cooperating with demons in order to benefit humans.

All four, as shown below, rely on the rabbinic perception of the entire universe, down to its last constitutive element, as ruled by God and subject to divine providence. Demons are no exception. But this is only one side of the coin. Far more significant is the other side: if nothing is alien to God's creation, then all beings, including demons, are bound by the one coherent moral system prevailing in the world. And this system has clear principles, manifest representatives, and evident implications for the way the world is run. Thus, the single magic-technical track of struggling with demons that is manifest in the incantation bowls is replaced in the Babylonian Talmud by various interrelations representing an utterly different power struggle based on the rabbis' model of belief, law, and authority.²⁷ Besides instructions for preventing demonic affliction that may reflect practices that were common in the rabbis' communities, the Talmud also contains demonological stories. Although they are usually perceived as descriptions of Jewish demonology in antiquity, these stories should instead be viewed as evidence of a power discourse within the genre of the sages' stories.

Defense from demons has two aspects in the talmudic discourse: (a) an attempt to separate the human and demonic communities from the outset by indicating the latter's preferred times and places, the circumstances of human weakness that invite demonic attack, and the demons' ways of invading the body and (b) instructions for a ritual confrontation with them when such a separation is not possible or has failed. Both trends are expressed in the informative-instructional and narrative sections alike.

1928), 501–35; Eli Yassif, *The Hebrew Folktale: History, Genre, Meaning*, trans. Jacqueline S. Teitelbaum (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), 144–56.

²⁷ See also the discussion in Ronis, *Demons in the Details*, 166–94.

The instructions are usually plain and technical. They also cover a wide range of matters, such as the names of the harmful demons, their typical injuries, and the means to be employed against them. We thereby learn about many kinds of evil spirits and their precise injuries, such as Šalihta and Palga, who cause migraines; Šabriri of the day and night, who are responsible for blindness; Qaşarin, who causes asthma and possibly also epileptic attacks; Qardiaqos, whose harm is linked to the drinking of new wine; Simta, who manifests as skin disease; Eshta and Baruqti, also known from the incantation bowls, who inflame the body with fever (Eshta) and blur the eyesight (Baruqti); Kuda, known from other sources for hurting women in labor; and Shivta, who was apparently perceived as being responsible for the deaths of infants.²⁸ We also learn about especially dangerous times (such as the eve of Wednesdays and of Fridays), when Agrat, the daughter of Maḥalat, and her cohort are permitted to attack; the hour of the banquet, when the spirit of Šereda is expected, or the 1st to 16th of Tamuz, when “they [the demons] are certainly to be found.”²⁹ The rabbis also indicate perilous places, foremost among them latrines and various shadows.³⁰ In addition, the instructions draw attention to hazardous behavior that might bring on a demonic attack—drinking an even number of beverages, walking alone at night, saying hello to a man at night (he might be a demon), sleeping alone (Lilith may attack), standing naked in front of a candle (epileptic possession), eating or drinking food or water that were left under the bed (even if stored underneath an iron lid), drinking water that was left outside on Wednesday and Friday nights, and many more.³¹ Although demons may assault a person for no apparent reason,³² information about their ways is highly important for people who share their lives with these invisible, injurious creatures.

The rabbis also specify many performative practices that are considered effective for ensuring protection against demons and for

²⁸ Šalihta and Palga—*Giṭ.* 68b; Šabriri—*Giṭ.* 69a; Qaşarin—*Bek.* 44b; Qardiaqos—*Giṭ.* 67b; Simta—*Šabb.* 67a; Eshta—*Šabb.* 66b–67a; Baruqti—*Giṭ.* 69b; Kuda—*‘Abod. Zar.* 29a; Shivta—*Yoma* 77b, *Ḥul.* 107b.

²⁹ See, respectively, *Pesaḥ.* 112b–113a, *Ḥul.* 105b, and *Pesaḥ.* 112a.

³⁰ *Pesaḥ.* 112a.

³¹ See, e.g., *Pesaḥ.* 110a–111b.

³² E.g., *Qidd.* 29b; *Ḥul.* 105b; *Šabb.* 151b; *Pesaḥ.* 112b.

exorcising them.³³ The gist of these practices is the use of oral or written performative formulas. For example:

For *simta* [a skin disease], one should say thus: “Baz Bazya, Mas Masya, Kas Kasya, Sharlai, and Amarlai, these are the angels who were sent from the land of Sodom.” And to heal boils and ulcers [he should say]: “Bazakh, Bazikh, Bazbazikh, Masmasikh, Kamon, Kamikh, may your appearance [be confined] to you, your appearance [be confined] to you, your place [be confined] to you, your place [be confined] to you, your seed be [like that] of a *qalut* and [like that] of a mule that is not fruitful and does not propagate; so [you, the boil] may you not be fruitful nor propagate in the body of NN.” [...] Against a demon, one should say thus: “You were closed up; closed up were you, cursed, broken, and banned, Ben Tit, Ben Tame, Ben Heimar like Shemgez [or, possibly, in the name of Gez], Merigez, and Istemai.” For a demon of the privy one should say thus: “On the scalp of a lion and on the snout of a lioness I found the demon Bar Shirika Panda, in a bed of leeks I knocked him down, and with the jawbone of an ass I hit him” (*Šabb.* 67a).³⁴

Knowledge is power. The possession of practical and accurate anti-demonic information undoubtedly empowers those who hold it. The integration of this kind of information into the curriculum of the rabbinic house of study means that by attending it, one obtains access to this approved oral (and relatively concealed) knowledge.

A good example of this principle is Abaye’s long series of sayings in tractate *Hullin* (105b–106a) concerning various customs, the true reasons for which he had not realized until his master revealed them to him. These sayings represent the shift from a pre-study to a post-study position, from ignorance and error to true, effective knowledge. Some of them expose anti-demonic rationalizations of customs that were probably well known (below). Thus, practices that Abaye (and apparently also others) had perceived as innocent and private, or, at

³³ For a discussion of rabbinic magic recipes, see Bohak, *Ancient Jewish Magic*, 406–22.

³⁴ I have translated the printed version with slight changes that are based on MSS Oxford 366, Vatican 108, and Munich 95. Partial parallels of some of these anti-demonic formulae can also be found on incantation bowls, attesting to the *Sitz im Leben* of the rabbinic discourse. See Manekin-Bamberger, “A Jewish Magical Handbook.”

most, as social behaviors, turn out to be anti-demonic techniques to be firmly followed.³⁵ The fundamental shift in the status of these practices is first exposed to Abaye in an intimate master-student situation and is then made accessible to the other students at the academy through their study of this situation. Being a rabbinic scholar, then, provided a power advantage in the struggle with demons even at the basic level of pure technical information, in terms of both efficient caution and confrontation.

This kind of benefit, however, was actually the least significant. Knowledge is an intellectual commodity that can be taught and transmitted by anyone, either inside or outside the house of study. Sorcerers and witches had their own information channels. Norms, on the other hand, demand not only knowledge (of the law), but also moral commitment and continuous practice. From the perspective of this study, the protection that scholars gained by adopting rabbinic norms seems much more significant.

First, note the bedtime recitation of the Shema prayer, which R. Yitzhak explicitly tied to protection from demons:

R. Yitzhak said, “Whoever recites the *Shema* upon his bed, it is as though he held a double-edged sword in his hand. For it is said (Ps 149:6): ‘Let the high praises of God be in their mouth, and a double-edged sword in their hand.’” [...] And R. Yitzhak said, “Whoever recites the *Shema* upon his bed, harmful demons (*mazikin*) keep away from him” (*Ber.* 5a).

This prescription seems to apply to everyone. Yet responding to R. Yehoshua ben Levi’s claim that one should say the Shema upon one’s bed even if he has already recited it in the synagogue, R. Nahman says,

³⁵ Abaye is deeply involved in the magic discourse of the Babylonian Talmud. Alongside the demonological traditions related to him cited in this article (including the series of sayings in tractate *Hullin*), see, for example, his ruling concerning the similarities between the laws of sorcerers and those of the Sabbath (*Sanh.* 67b), his (and Rava’s) exclusion of anything that can be used as a remedy from “the ways of the Amorites,” and his foster mother’s saying about the power of “knots” (“Three stop [illness], five cure [it], seven [work] even against witchcraft”), which he brings to the house of study (*Šabb.* 66b). As Aviad Recht has convincingly shown, Abaye had an immense influence on Babylonian talmudic medicine, introducing both demonological and magical elements into it. See Recht, “Babylonian Talmudic Medicine—A Diachronic Perspective” [Hebrew] (PhD diss., Tel Aviv University, 2020), 83–98.

“If he is a scholar (*talmid ḥakham*) then it is not necessary” (*Ber.* 4b–5a). Though not everyone adopted R. Nahman’s view—Abaye opposed it by saying, “Even a scholar should recite a verse of supplication, such as ‘into Your hand I commit my spirit. You have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God (Ps 31:6)’” (*Ber.* 5a)—R. Nahman does note the scholars’ relative advantage concerning the defense against demons, and through the very presentation of his view, this issue continues to reverberate in the discourse.

It should be noted that the debate about the bedtime recitation of the Shema is unrelated to the sages’ technical knowledge of demons. The scholars’ shield, which makes the recitation redundant, is based solely on their merits and is inherent to their identity. It is built on their apprehension of the Torah in all its forms through the everlasting rite of study, up to their complete identification with it.³⁶ A brief episode in tractate *Pesaḥim* expresses this idea through a concrete example:

Abaye was walking along, with R. Papa on his right and R. Huna son of R. Joshua on his left. He saw Qetev Meriri approaching him on the left. He transferred R. Papa to his left and R. Huna son of R. Joshua to his right. Said R. Papa to him: “Wherein am I different that you were not afraid on my behalf?” “The time is in your favor,” replied he (*Pesaḥ.* 111b).

The most significant element in this concise narrative is the substance of its seemingly obvious underlying proof. Listeners (and then readers) naturally pay attention to the plot and accept without question the fact that Abaye *could see* and recognize Qetev Meriri

³⁶ See Jacob Neusner, “The Phenomenon of the Rabbi in Late Antiquity,” *Numen* 16 (1969): 1–20; Neusner, “The Phenomenon of the Rabbi in Late Antiquity II: The Ritual of ‘Being a Rabbi’ in Late Sasanian Babylonia,” *Numen* 17 (1970): 1–18. For an explicit statement on the protective power of Torah study and practice, see *Num. Rab.* 12:3: “The Holy One, blessed be He, says: ‘I shall forge a weapon for all who trade in the truth of the Torah.’ R. Shimon b. Yoḥai said: ‘The truth of the Torah is a weapon to its owners.’ R. Shimon b. Yoḥai said: ‘The Holy One, blessed be He, gave Israel a weapon at Sinai on which the Ineffable Name was written: You shall not be afraid of the terror by night (Psalms 91:5)—of Agrat, daughter of Maḥalat, and her chariot, nor of any of the demons who hold sway at night.’”

approaching him.³⁷ The privilege that enabled him to react was certainly limited to very few individuals, who therefore had a significant advantage over the masses that could not see, but had to live among, and confront, demons on their way to attack anywhere at any time. Doomed to constant uncertainty and terror, they were oblivious to the imminent disaster, while rabbis, Abaye in this case, could foresee and prepare for it. Now we can turn to admire Abaye's knowledge and his brisk and efficient move. But this is the explicit stratum of the message, the one with which the reader can argue following R. Papa's reaction. The implicit one penetrates silently and strikes root in the audience's mind.

Another consequence of the rabbis' assimilation of the Torah is the power of their prayers, which, besides other benefits, can heal injuries inflicted by demons. This idea is presented in a short narrative giving instructions for seeing demons:

Whoever wishes to see them, let him bring the afterbirth of a black female cat who is the offspring of a black female cat, the firstborn of a firstborn, let him roast it in fire and grind it to powder and let him fill his eye [with the ashes] and he will see them. Let him put [the remaining ashes] into an iron tube and shut it with an iron seal, lest they [the demons] should steal it [the ashes] from him. And let him close his mouth [while doing this], lest he come to harm. R. Bivi, son of Abaye, did so, saw [the demons], and came to harm. The scholars prayed [literally: asked for mercy] for him and he recovered (*Ber.* 6a).

My interest in this tradition is not in the instructions themselves (part of the rabbinic curriculum!), but rather in the brief episode at the end, and especially in its closing words. The seemingly naïve sentence "the scholars prayed for him and he recovered" expresses in a nutshell the general tendency that I am attempting to present more fully in this

³⁷ The Talmud mentions two kinds of Qetev, one active before noon and one after it (*Pesah.* 111b). According to another tradition, Qetev rules at midday, between the fourth and ninth hour of the day. See *Num. Rab.* 12:3 (*ibid.*) and the parallels in *Lam. Rab.* 1:29; *Midr. Ps.* 91. These sources also add that "its [Qetev's] head is like a calf's, and one horn protrudes from its forehead... he is covered with scales, hairy all over, and full of eyes. [...] And he has one eye set in his heart and anyone who sees him can never survive, whether it be man or beast. Anyone who sees him drops down dead" (*Num. Rab.* 12:3).

article: the power of the rabbis' prayer, a canonical rite for gaining power performed by the religious and social establishment whose representatives are both the authors and the heroes of the talmudic demonological stories, is the effective means of healing demonic harm. The power of incantations, another ritual act for gaining anti-demonic power that was widespread in Babylonian Jewry, is replaced by that of prayer, and the authority of the sorcerer by that of the rabbi.

In this light, the circumstances of the injury become highly significant. The encounter with the demons experienced by R. Bivi, son of Abaye, is not an unfortunate random event, but rather the opposite. It is an explicit instance of deliberately crossing the border between humans and demons, a deliberate ripping off of the veil of invisibility that is a major source of the demons' power over humans, a deliberate provocation based on a technique that in retrospect proved to be "true" rabbinic knowledge. R. Bivi implemented a strategy that is the opposite of separation. Like the hero of a folktale, he invaded the demons' realm by resorting to talmudic knowledge. He was injured, one is led to assume, by the most furious demons, but was rescued by an even more powerful force—the rabbis' prayer.³⁸

The replacement of the sorcerer with the rabbi as the force overpowering the demons is even more forcefully manifest in other elaborate demonological stories. Realistic accounts of rabbinic-demonic confrontations are ascribed to well-known talmudic figures as part of a rhetorical strategy seeking to intensify the narratives' credibility in the service of their social-didactic purpose. In these stories, the technical-magical response of self-defense originating in the inferiority of human power vs. that of the demons and in the vulnerability of humans as victims is replaced by a more self-assured and active reaction. At the core of this type of protection is the rabbis' authority and leadership in both the religious and the legal spheres,

³⁸ On the ritual power of the rabbis, which is manifest throughout rabbinic literature, see, e.g., Gideon Bohak, "Magical Means for Handling *Minim* in Rabbinic Literature," in *The Image of the Judeo-Christians in Ancient Jewish and Christian Literature*, ed. Peter J. Tomson and Doris Lambers-Petri (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 267–79; Harari, *Jewish Magic*, 353–86. Cf. J.H. Chajes, "Rabbis and Their (In)Famous Magic: Classical Foundations, Medieval and Early Modern Reverberations," in *Jewish Studies at the Crossroads of Anthropology and History: Authority, Diaspora, Tradition*, ed. Ra'anan Boustán, Oren Kosansky, and Marina Rustow (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 58–79.

resting on the acknowledgement (to be disseminated) that if the entire universe is subject to one divine providence whose true representatives are the rabbis, then even demons recede before them due to their holiness, honor, and authority.

A striking combination of the instructive and narrative tendencies, or better still, the anchoring of directives in a narrative in a way that makes the latter an explanatory platform for an apparently widespread praxis, is found in tractate *Pesaḥim*. In this case, the praxis is validated by tying it to the rabbis' authority in order to limit the demonic sphere and set borders on its time and place:

“And do not go out alone at night”—for it was taught: one should not go out alone at night, that is to say on the nights of either Wednesdays or Sabbaths, because Agrat, daughter of Maḥalat, she and 180,000 destroying angels go forth and each has permission to wreak destruction independently. Originally, they were about every day. Once, she met R. Ḥanina, son of Dosa. She said to him: “Had they not made an announcement concerning you in Heaven: ‘Take heed of Ḥanina and his learning,’ I would have put you in danger.” “If I am of account in Heaven,” replied he, “I order you never to pass through settled regions.” “I beg you,” she replied, “leave me a little room.” So he left her the nights of Sabbaths and the nights of Wednesdays (*Pesaḥ*. 112b).

In the continuation of the passage a similar story is brought about Abaye, who sets spatial limits on Agrat and her destructive cohort and pushes them to the margins of the settled regions (*Pesaḥ*. 112b–113a). The plausible assumption is that these narratives reflect social norms postulating that specific times and places necessitate extra protection from demons. By emphasizing the other side of the equation—that is, the relative safety ensured during most nights of the week and in most of the settled region—the Talmud endorses these norms and empowers rabbis to control the chaos caused by demons and limit their harm. Note that these two rabbis do not function in these stories as mere exorcists who draw a concrete separation by expelling a specific demon on a specific occasion, but rather as arch-exorcists,

who impose principles about parting to be followed by demons in all places at all times.³⁹

Another story that intertwines practical and didactic elements describes a town-officer and a group of demons in a thicket of canes. The well-known magical view that precise information concerning the injury-causing demon is required in order to respond effectively is linked, almost inadvertently, to the view that such information is only available to *real* scholars. It says:

A thicket of canes that is near a town has no less than sixty demons. Why should it be noted? To write him [the one who has been harmed in the thicket] an amulet. [As in the case of] a certain town-officer who went and stood by a thicket of canes near the town. Sixty demons entered him and he was in danger. He went to a scholar who did not know that sixty demons had been in the thicket. He [that scholar] wrote him an amulet for one demon. He then heard them [the demons] holding a celebration within him and singing, “The man’s turban is like a scholar’s, we examined him and found he does not know ‘Blessed [art Thou]’” [that is, though he looks like a scholar, he lacks the appropriate liturgical-normative knowledge showing he is indeed one!]. A scholar, who knew that in the thicket were sixty demons, came and wrote him an amulet for sixty demons. He then heard them [the demons] saying: “Clear away your vessels from here” [leave] (*Pesah*. 111b).

This story places a magical-exorcistic episode at the very center of the rabbis’ realm and delivers a clear message: only a *real* scholar possesses true and effective magical knowledge. The concrete information discussed in the house of study concerning the thicket of

³⁹ R. Ḥanina ben Dosa is one of the two arch-exorcists mentioned in the Aramaic incantation bowls (the other is R. Joshua bar Peraḥia, who was mentioned above). At least a dozen bowls include the historiola about his meeting with Lilith and the fact that he confronted her saying, “You make darkness and it is night, wherein all the animals of the forest creep” (Ps 104:20) in their exorcistic texts. See Shaked, Ford, and Bhayro, *Aramaic Bowl Spells*, 53–100. I have recently located a short hagiographic collection of tales about R. Ḥanina ben Dosa in the texts from the Cairo Genizah, which seems to be very early. In this collection, R. Ḥanina is also described as an experienced exorcist, and this was unquestionably a major aspect of his image in the talmudic period. I intend to publish a detailed study of this Genizah text in the near future.

canes is important for healing the injury inflicted by the demons, but ultimately trivial. Tying this information to normative-legal knowledge, the wares of a *real* scholar, is what makes it so significant in the rabbis' marketing of their approach to dealing with demons.

The stories discussed so far tie together two facets of the rabbinic world in its confrontation with demons: holiness and erudition. A third one—the individual providence that protects those favored by God—is revealed in yet another story, which bears no traces of magical practice and presents rescue as a goal attained through prayer and miracles:

R. Jacob, son of R. Aḥa b. Jacob, was sent by his father to Abaye. When he [the son] returned, he [his father] saw that his learning was dull and said: "I am better than you, you remain here and I will go." Abaye heard that he was coming. In Abaye's house of study was a demon and, when a pair would enter, even in the daytime, they would be injured. He [Abaye] told them: "Let no one allow him a place to sleep, perhaps a miracle will happen [through his merits]." He [R. Aḥa] entered and spent the night in that house of study. He [the demon] appeared to him in the guise of a seven-headed dragon, and every time he [R. Aḥa] knelt [in prayer], one of its heads fell off. The next day he told them: "Had not a miracle occurred—you would have endangered me [my life]" (Qidd. 29b).

The folkloristic aspects of this narrative as well as its Christian parallels, mainly the story of St. George and the dragon in *The Golden Legend*, have already been considered.⁴⁰ My interest is in R. Aḥa, trapped and involuntarily confronting a monstrous demon in a place of holiness—one who would harm even a pair of people and even in the daytime (unlike the typical demonic attack, where a lone person is targeted at night) and who could not even be handled by Abaye, who, as noted, was versed in demonic issues. By locating the plot in the house of study, the author implies that the holiness of the place does not suffice to expel demons and that only human merits that—according to the story—are immanent in the most eminent scholars

⁴⁰ See Yassif, *The Hebrew Folktale*, 152–54. Cf. Jacob de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, trans. William G. Ryan (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 1:238–40.

will be able to achieve this. Just as exorcistic knowledge is not a function of a scholar's exterior appearance (the turban), so too is the power to defeat a demon not a function of the Torah's place, but rather of the person who assimilates and identifies with it. By replacing the sword with prayer and human bravery with a divine miracle, the Jewish ecotype of the hero who severs the dragon's seven heads and saves the community (or the princes) from its terror⁴¹ delivers an unequivocal message: the individual's fate, even in matters of demons, is decided by God, and, more significantly, divine grace is reserved for those who abide by the rabbinic norms of Torah and law. In this version of the Dragon Slayer folktale type (ATU 300), the sword that usually serves the hero to overcome the monster is replaced by a "sword of the tongue," though not a magic one.⁴² Spells and adjurations typical of exorcisms are substituted by a sword of prayer: still a speech-act, but a normative one, performed by those who, owing to their merits, are protected by divine providence.

So far on the advantages of the sages' knowledge, virtues, and merits in the confrontations with demons. Let us turn now to another pattern of the rabbi-demon relationship, where legal authority is at the center. This textual unit is part of a series of explanations of various customs that, as noted, were revealed to Abaye by his master. It is the story that follows one of these explanations that is the focus of my interest:

And Abaye said: "Initially, I used to say that one does not sit under a drainpipe because of the waste water, but my Master told

⁴¹ See Stith Thompson, *Motif Index of Folk Literature*, 6 vols., rev. and expanded ed. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1966), B11.23.1; Hans-Jorg Uther, *The Types of International Folktales: A Classification and Bibliography, Based on the System of Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 2004), type 300: The Dragon Slayer. Cf. Yassif, *The Hebrew Folktale*, 497 n. 82. On ecotypes (oikotypes) and the process of oikotification, see Galit Hasan-Rokem, "Ecotypes: Theory of the Lived and Narrated Experience," *Narrative Culture* 3, no. 1 (2016): 110–37; Lauri Honko, "Four Forms of Adaptation of Tradition," *Studia Fennica* 26 (1981): 19–33; Carl W. von Sydow, "Geography and Folktale Oikotypes," in von Sydow, *Selected Papers on Folklore* (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1948), 44–59.

⁴² On the place of this talmudic narrative in the traditions about "the sword of the tongue" in late antique Judaism, see Harari, "Moses, the Sword, and *The Sword of Moses*: Between Rabbinical and Magical Traditions," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 12 (2005): 293–329.

me it is because demons are to be found [there].” Some carriers bearing a barrel of wine wanted to rest. They put it down under a drainpipe and it burst. They came to Mar b. R. Ashi, who took out trumpets and banned him [the demon who had caused this]. He [the demon] came before him. Said he [Mar b. R. Ashi]: “Why did you do this?” Said he [the demon]: “What could I do? They put it in my ear.” Said he [Mar]: “What were you doing in a public place? You are the one who changed [the agreed division of space between people and demons]; go pay [compensation to the carriers]. Said he [the demon]: “Let the master set a date and I will pay.” He set him a date. When it arrived, he [the demon] delayed [and did not come to pay]. When he came, he said [Mar to the demon]: “Why did you not come on time?” Said he: “We have no right to take away anything that is tied up, sealed, and counted, and can only take something that has been abandoned” (*Hul.* 105b).

First, note the concepts in the subtext that function as the *obvious* foundation of the entire structure: (a) the rabbi is the one consulted when the demon inflicts an injury and (b) his legal authority extends to the demonic realm. Using the demonic theme, the story does not call attention to the rabbi’s virtues or knowledge, but to his legal power. But these are only the more apparent features.

Earlier sayings and stories acknowledged clear temporal and spatial boundaries between humans and demons, supplying the weaker group with options for reacting to aggressive encroachments from the stronger one. The picture in this narrative, however, is quite different. It points to their joint existence that, in the course of the story, changes from a situation of one beside the other to one of both together. Accordingly, the two groups shift from a relationship involving unexpected aggression and a forceful reaction into one featuring a legal negotiation. This story, then, replaces the violent struggle between demons and humans with an attempt to organize their joint existence in a tolerable manner by means of custom, law, and passing judgment. Unsurprisingly, the leading authority in the suggested common order is the rabbi. He is the one who can force the demon to reveal himself and to accept both his inquiry and his judgment by threatening excommunication. Demonic aggression thus faces a new human power—the power to tame and to domesticate. As in many other sources, the one crossing the virtual border between demons

and humans is the demon, but this time, he is pushed by a ban. He appears in Mar's court, negotiates with him, and accepts his ruling.

This kind of authority over demons is completely new and should not be confused with the *get* formula appearing in magic bowls. The bowls merely make technical use of a halakhic procedure (at times simply by referring to R. Joshua bar Peraḥia's mythological *get*) that was implemented in a relationship between humans and demons and integrated into an adjuration for expulsion. The story of the wine barrel is entirely different and deals with the rabbi's personal authority to ban, question, and sentence the demon, and moreover, to demand and indeed receive an explanation when his verdict is not followed to the letter. The deep message of this story touches on the behavior of the demon, who endorses the rabbinic legal discourse by cooperating with the legal establishment. He attends court, argues, accepts the verdict, and, most significantly, explains his delay in complying with the compensation sentence in the halakic terms of negotiations typical of the house of study.⁴³ The demon's response to Mar mirrors the terms of the talmudic negotiation that Mar had imposed on him, attesting not only to the acceptance of Mar's formal legal authority, but also to the actual assimilation of the talmudic method that generated this authority in the first place. He is defeated by a power much stronger than that of the explicit adjuration—the gentle, hidden, and absolute power of the discourse. He is not expelled but is bound by the fetters of the rabbinic discourse, paralyzed and domesticated.

Imposing rabbinic culture on the wild, demonic sphere has further consequences. If demons are not merely anarchic and immoral beings, if they take part in human society and submit to its authority, then a new type of relationship with humans comes about, involving cooperation and service. Rabbis bring up information received from demons for discussion in the house of study on two occasions. In both cases, the demons are named and the information they supply concerning demonic issues is naturally integrated into the talmudic discourse. Not only is no opposition in principle raised

⁴³ I agree with Yassif concerning the exemplary character of this story, but I hold that the gist of its message is neither Abaye's claim nor the warning against leaving unmarked property in the public domain (Yassif, *The Hebrew Folktale*, 154–55). Rather, these merely served as the frame for the canvas on which the demon's domestication was so skillfully traced.

regarding the credibility of this information source, but the very conversation between the sages and the demons, who have Jewish names, is presented as part of the natural order of their common life.⁴⁴

In one case—a discussion about allowing a woman to remarry that relies on a “heavenly voice” (*bat-qol*) informing her of her husband’s death, which, when a suspicion is raised lest the source was a demon, proceeds to deal with the identification of demons—R. Ḥanina quotes something he was told by the demon Jonathan: “R. Ḥanina said, the demon Jonathan told me, ‘They [demons] have a shadow, but not a shadow of a shadow’” (*Yebam.* 122a). In the other instance, “inside” information received from the demon Joseph is quoted by two rabbis in a discussion about demonic injury when drinking an even number of beverages. His words tip the scales in the opposite direction, enrich the discussion, and provoke various reactions:

R. Yosef said, “Joseph the demon told me, ‘Asmodeus, the king of demons, is appointed over all pairs,’ and a king is not designated a harmful spirit.” Others opine differently: “Quite the contrary, a king is hot-tempered and does whatever he wishes” [...]. R. Papa said, “Joseph the demon told me, ‘For [drinking] two [cups] we kill, for four [cups] we do not kill. For four we cause harm. For two [we harm], whether [drunk] unwittingly or deliberately. For four—[if drunk] deliberately, we do [harm, but if drunk unwittingly] we do not [harm].’ And if one forgot [himself] and happened to go out, what is his remedy? Let him take his right-hand thumb in his left hand and hold his left-hand [thumb] in his right hand and say: ‘You and I are three.’ And should he hear a voice [say], ‘You and I are surely four,’ let him say [that is, to the demon speaking], ‘You and I are surely five.’ And should he hear [the voice] say, ‘You and I are surely six,’ let him say, ‘You and I are surely seven.’ Once, it happened [that the man counted] until a hundred-and-one, and the demon burst” (*Pesah.* 110a).

⁴⁴ Two early rabbinic figures, R. Hillel the Elder and R. Johanan ben Zakkai, are generally said to have known the language of demons (*Sof.* 16:9 and *Sukkah* 28a respectively), but no actual interaction with them or information given by them is indicated.

It is tempting to see Joseph as the cooperative demon whom, in another tradition, R. Papa is said to have kept in his household (though there are no textual grounds for linking these two sources). The story about that demon is part of a discussion concerning the reason for pouring off some water from a jug before drinking from it (“evil water”). This story is even more significant in the present context because it expresses, as though in passing, the highest degree of demonic domestication, presenting the shared life of demons and humans as a natural and obvious reality:

The demon who was in the house of R. Papa went once to fetch water from the river. He was away a long time. When he returned he was asked, “Why were you so long?” He replied, “[I waited] until the evil waters had all gone.” In the meantime he saw them pouring off [a little water] from the mouth of the jug. He said, “Had I known that you were in the habit of doing this I would not have taken so long” (*Hul.* 105b–106a).

The coexistence of humans and demons could hardly have been phrased more explicitly than in this story. Shared dwellings, shared toil, shared knowledge, and exchanges based on mutual reflection and adjustment come forth in this tradition, whose power is precisely in its narrative restraint.

A further step in the direction I have followed here is evident in a more famous and picturesque tradition—the account of R. Shimon b. Yoḥai’s voyage to Rome to cancel harsh edicts. In this story, where the protagonists—the rabbi and the demon—work hand in hand, cooperation not only comes forth in conversations and in their shared day-to-day life, but also leads to a heroic endeavor at the heart of the evil empire, meant to save the people from its ruthless decrees:

The government once issued a decree that they should not keep the Sabbath or circumcise their children and that they should have intercourse with menstruating women. [...] They said: “Who will go and annul the decrees? Let R. Shimon b. Yoḥai go for he is learned in miracles.” [...] Ben Temalion came to meet him. “Do you wish me to come with you?” R. Shimon wept and said: “To my ancestor’s handmaid [Hagar], an angel appeared three times, and to me not even once [but this demon instead]? Let the miracle come anyhow!” He [Ben Temalion] preceded him

and entered the emperor's daughter. When he arrived there, he said: "Ben Temalion, come out! Ben Temalion, come out!" And since they called him, he came out and left. He [the emperor] said to them: "Ask for whatever you came to ask." They entered the treasure house to take [whatever] they chose. They found that bill [of the decrees], took it, and tore it (*Me'il*. 17a-b).⁴⁵

For the first time, we come across a demonic initiative that is deliberately intended to help humans.⁴⁶ The narrative does reflect historical reality, but it is neither a reality of actual wonder-making nor one of Jewish-Christian polemics or Jewish-Roman politics.⁴⁷ Instead, it is the reality of the circles that told and preserved this story, the reality of the house of study—the rabbinic system of morality and the beliefs that the rabbis strove to entrench and market in various discursive ways, including hagiography.

A service performed by a demon obviously attests to the highest degree of surrender and of human control over the demonic element in the world. True, it is not the kind of control attested in the magic literature, but rather one attained through the normative way of miracle. Though presenting Ben Temalion's initiative as a miracle does not subject him to humans, but rather to God, it also links his service to those "learned in miracles"; that is, deserving of them. In this respect, the Ben Temalion story marks the climax of the multifaceted depiction of relationships between rabbis and demons in the Babylonian Talmud. More than any other, this tradition reflects the idea of the demons' complete integration into the all-inclusive order of the world run by heavenly providence. This story is a dramatic and uncompromising expression of a trend typical of the Talmud's demonological stories, of domesticating the demonic into

⁴⁵ Cf. the more elaborate version of this story in Adolph Jellinek, *Bet ha-Midrash*, 2nd ed. (Jerusalem: Bamberger & Wohrmann, 1938), 6:128–30.

⁴⁶ Another kind of collaboration initiated by a demon is found in two relatively late *midrashim* about R. Yosi of Tsitur and the members of his village, who together with a friendly demon dwelling in the local well, struggled against a violent demon who had tried to take over the well. See *Lev. Rab.* 24:3; *Tanḥ.*, *Keddoshim* 9.

⁴⁷ See, respectively, Meir Bar-Ilan, "Exorcism by Rabbis: Talmudic Sages and Magic" [Hebrew], *Daat* 34 (1995): 17–31; Yassif, *The Hebrew Folktale*, 154–55; Zeev Yavetz, *History of the People of Israel* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Am Olam, 1963), 6:318–20.

the normative world of the house of study and submitting it, be it directly or indirectly, to the authority of the rabbis.

Conclusion

Demons were an inseparable part of the Jewish cosmology of late antiquity, as attested by various sources, magic and others, from the periods of the Second Temple, the Mishnah, and the Talmud. Alongside their agreement about the demons' character and the danger they represented to human life, these sources differ in how they deal with demons. Babylonian incantation bowls, which record anti-demonic magic actions in concrete situations of distress affecting concrete clients, point to a uniform aggressive approach toward demons designed to control them and to permanently remove them from the body, household, and life of the person they had harmed. If other patterns of human-demon relationships existed in the imagination of the Jewish communities served by the bowl writers resembling those found in later sources (such as gathering devils to send them on missions benefitting humans, summoning them in dreams in order to learn something from them, or pleasing them in order to prevent harm), we have no evidence of them.⁴⁸ Most of the magic evidence we have has survived because of its material character—burnt clay bowls that resisted the ravages of time. Professionally speaking, this evidence is all of one kind, reflecting a uniform conception of the demon-human relationship and a uniform aspiration regarding the desirable state of affairs—separation between the harmful entities that are hostile to humans and their victims.

The Babylonian Talmud, more than an expression of the rabbis' contemporary culture and place, is an expression of the culture prevalent in the rabbinic circles that created it—the system of beliefs and values that these circles defined as “Oral Law” and of their self-perception as the earthly representatives of this Torah and of the one who imparted it to the world. And yet, the rabbinic cosmology clearly echoes that of the Jewish—and at times also the Gentile—

⁴⁸ See, e.g., Bohak, “Expelling Demons”; Harari, “Demonic Dream Divination”; Isaac J. Levy and Rosemary Levy-Zumwalt, *Ritual Medical Lore of Sephardic Women: Sweetening the Spirits, Healing the Sick* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2002); Raphael Patai, “Indulco and Mumia,” in Patai, *On Jewish Folklore* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1983), 302–13.

surroundings in which the sages lived and acted. Talmudic literature, to which hardly any aspect of human and social life is alien, is patently polyphonic. It gathers stories about and from hundreds of rabbis (*tanna'im* and *amora'im*) who lived in separate communities in Babylon and the Land of Israel in the course of centuries, and it does not attempt to reconcile their statements. Contrary to the magic sources available to us, the Talmud deals with demons in diverse ways. The magic approach, focused on separation and *ad hoc* protection, is conveyed in concrete instructions that are part of the discourse in the house of study. Alongside it, we find general sayings about demons—their origin, their character, and the danger they represent.

The gist of the demonic discourse in the house of study, however, centers on accounts where the sages are the heroes. These stories were not meant to serve the human contest with demons, but rather the rabbinic propaganda regarding the world of the Oral Law and their role within it. The rabbis, then, use the demonic theme in an exemplary way and, from this perspective, present additional patterns of relationships between humans—rabbis—and demons. These patterns reflect not only a built-in advantage on the sages' part in the protection from demons, but also a limitation in principle of the time and space in which the demons are allowed to act, the demons' domestication by the rabbis and their surrender to legal rabbinic authority, collaborative knowledge-sharing and action between them and the rabbis, and even demonic assistance in a national rescue endeavor headed by a rabbi "learned in miracles." As in Jewish magic in general, in the demonic realm we must also distinguish the reality of life vs. literary fantasy: charm recipes and performative objects vs. stories; actions meant to affect the world and to attain real change through rites and incantations vs. stories meant to act through narrative means in an entirely different context. The sources discussed in this article convey both of these trends. Accordingly, they point to different ways of dealing with demons in the Babylonian Jewish community in late antiquity.