

Scribal Manuals and Kabbalistic Intentions: Learned Traditions of Writing Amulets in Premodern Ashkenaz

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Abstract

This article examines the evolution of Jewish scribal practices in medieval and early modern Central-Eastern Europe, focusing on the intersection between traditional scribal laws for ritual texts (*STaM*), kabbalistic intentional practices, and amulet-writing traditions. It argues that the concept of intentional practice performed “for its own sake” developed in the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Ashkenaz became foundational for later kabbalistic interpretations of intentional scribal work. This study traces how the requirement of intentional writing influenced both elite kabbalistic approaches to textuality and practical scribal work in producing ritual and apotropaic objects. Through analysis of medieval Ashkenazi sources and a case study of a kabbalistic “Amulet of Four Lines,” the article demonstrates how Ashkenazi scribal traditions provided fertile ground for the integration of kabbalistic writing practices in Central-Eastern Europe prior to and independent of Lurianic kabbalistic influences. This study contributes to our understanding of how material textual objects became construed as imbued with divine potency through intentional scribal work, demonstrating continuities between regulated ritual writing and magical protective practices in the premodern Ashkenazi cultural sphere.

Introduction

Jewish religious legal literatures provide a well-defined understanding of the scribal craft that pertains to writing texts for ritual use: Torah scrolls, *tefillin*, and *mezuzot*. Beginning with several discussions in the Talmud, these legal prescriptions preserved a stable set of scribal duties, encompassing both the material and the intellectual aspects of scribal obligations from late antiquity until the sixteenth century. Early rabbinic literature defined the materials allowed for the

preparation of valid Torah scrolls, *tefillin*, and *mezuzot* (rendered by the abbreviation *STaM*), as well as the necessary prerequisites, obligations, and work sequence for a person writing these texts by hand.¹ Yet despite their common foundation in the talmudic literatures, both writing materials and scribal customs widely differed throughout the Jewish diaspora and across the generations. Locally produced scribal manuals and home-grown rabbinic discussions appear to reflect variations in rules that the specific diasporic conditions brought to the craft of ritual writing. Scholars have claimed that in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the Central and East-Central European (Ashkenazi) cultural zone developed a particular attitude toward ritual writing.² At its center lies the crucial concept of *‘ibud li-shmah*—intentional practice performed by a scribe “for its own sake,” uninterrupted by any impeding thoughts or disturbances and entirely focused on the act that must be carried out selflessly and consciously. In what follows, I will argue that this reinterpretation of scribal work performed *li-shmah* that developed in Ashkenaz in the Middle Ages became an anchor for the dominant practical kabbalistic reinterpretations of scribal norms reliant on mystical intentions (*kavanot*) and intentional acts (*be-khavanah*) that were widely endorsed in post-medieval Central and Eastern Europe.

What constituted the craft of amulet-writing in early modern East-Central Europe, and what connected it to the established scribal laws and customs on the one hand and to kabbalistic intentional practices on the other? This essay explores the points of convergence between the early Ashkenazi scribal laws, practical manuals for writing amulets, and kabbalistic guidelines for intentional writing popularized in premodern Ashkenaz, both before and independently of the rise of Lurianic kabbalistic concepts of scribality and writing practices from the seventeenth century onwards.³ As I will argue, the requirement of intentional making of written ritual objects affected the reception and adaptations of learned kabbalistic scribal customs

¹ In, e.g., BT *Giṭ.* 54b, BT *Menah.* 42b, BT *Sanh.* 48b, and BT *Pesah.* 50b, as well as in two minor talmudic tractates, *Masekhet Soferim* and *Masekhet Sefer Torah*.

² See Annett Martini, “Ritual Consecration in the Context of Writing the Holy Scrolls: Jews in Medieval Europe between Demarcation and Acculturation,” *European Journal of Jewish Studies* 11 (2017): 174–202.

³ On the Lurianic conceptualizations of scribal work and their reception in Eastern and Central Europe, see Agata Paluch, “‘How to Write According to the Tradition’: Kabbalistic Scribal Manuals in the Seventeenth-Century Ashkenaz (East-Central Europe),” forthcoming.

and their elite attitudes to textuality just as much as it underpinned practical kabbalistic, oftentimes audacious scribal workmanship in early modern Central-Eastern Europe.

This article begins by tracing the development of Ashkenazi scribal regulations and the legal tradition of writing *STaM* objects with intention, enacted for their own sake and with an additional formula recited by the scribe. It then continues to explore the intentionality and performativity for its own sake, with kabbalistic ideals of intention (*kavanah*) as a backdrop for the convergence of early Ashkenazi scribal customs and premodern ideas regarding the crafting of powerful textual-material objects. Turning to the medieval Ashkenazi sources on scribal practices, it then examines ideas about creating amuletic objects according to the legal requirements imposed on the writing of *STaM*. Lastly, this article showcases an early textual tradition for crafting a kabbalistic “amulet of four lines,” which both deploys kabbalistic practices of intention and relies on accepted scribal regulations in order to create a magical material object. In doing so, it argues that early Ashkenazi scribal laws and customs provided fertile ground for the long-lasting circulation of ideas about amulets that had to be produced according to the laws of *STaM* and infused with selfless intention. These ideas facilitated the adoption of various later kabbalistic writing practices and related kabbalistic theosophies into the postmedieval Ashkenazi milieu, both elite and popular—especially those that emphasized intentional and sensory scribal work in creating material objects imbued with enduring divine potency, to be used in magical, kabbalistic, or protective ways alike.

1 Premodern Ashkenazi Regulations of Intentional Scribal Performances

Early rabbinic concepts prescribed four distinct processes to be carried out “for their own sake” (*li-shman*, and thus, “with selfless intention”): the Temple-related sacrifices, the study of Torah and thus the fulfilling of its commandments, the procuring of marriage and divorce documents, and the making of *STaM*. In all of these acts, carrying out tasks “for their own sake” entails full intention, devoted to the performed action and to its purpose, through which the performance can fulfil its function. Performing ritual writing acts *li-shman* thus consigns them, and all that they encompass, to the

appropriate realm of the sacred.⁴ For writing Torah scrolls and other ritual texts, the obligation of acting *for its own sake* appears in the context of preparing parchments, specifically for the purpose of making the scroll. If the scribe does not correctly allocate—indeed, sanctify—the parchment *for its own sake* when processing it, it is deemed invalid (BT *Git.* 54b). ‘*Ibud li-shmah*, an intentional action performed “for its own sake,” acquires the highest significance when it comes to the issue of writing the divine name on the ritual textual object. As BT *Git.* 54b stipulates, following a discussion on the proper intentionality regarding the Temple offerings, “a scroll in which the names of God have not been written for their own sake (*li-shman*) is not worth anything.” Consequently, the law recommends that the scribe should not be paid for his work in such cases, since the writing was not performed properly and he did not validate the Torah scroll according to its prescribed purpose.⁵

All of the acts that were required to be performed *for their own sake* according to early rabbinic literature entailed a cognizant, intentional performance that legally validated both the act and the objects it involved, inscribing them into the appropriate category of the holy. Nevertheless, it was in the medieval Ashkenazi world that these early halakhic rules evolved to encompass a choreography of intentional and sensory acts revolving around the proper treatment, preparation, and application of the material components of writing that would engender a ritual object carrying the divine name. In the context of twelfth-century Northern France, Rabbenu Tam (Jacob Tam, d. 1171) ruled that an intentional performance *for its own sake* was necessary for both the preparation of writing materials and the act of writing. Aside from the absolute mental focus on the act to be carried out, this performance was proscribed to consist of a verbal formula recited “for the purpose of the Torah of Israel,” which was necessary for the writing and its instruments to be considered legitimate.⁶ If performed correctly, both the mental and the verbal act together were believed to have a lasting impact on the writing materials. Thus, this double mental-vocal process of preparation

⁴ Cf. the early use of the term in the context of the study of Torah and the performance of the commandments, BT *Ber.* 17a, BT. *Sanh.* 99a and 105b, BT *Sukkah* 49b, *Pirque Rabbi Eliezer*, chapter 13; JT *Hag.* 1:1.

⁵ See Martini, “Ritual Consecration,” 78–184, for other such occurrences in early rabbinic literature.

⁶ Rabbenu Jacob Tam, *Hilkhot [Tikun] Sefer Torah*, 92–94.

performed *li-shmah* was considered sufficient to render the support material valid for later use, as it would inculcate the parchment with the status of the sacred matter. For the subsequent generations of commentators from the French and German lands, it was also not enough for the scribe to mentally focus on the work of preparing for the writing of *STaM*. Rather, the verbal dedication formula ought to be recited aloud, especially since the texts to be inscribed included divine names.⁷ While the idea of verbalizing the purpose of scribal work in order to validate it and its material effects was at times somewhat contested or modified in the Ashkenazi cultural zone, it was apparently never completely rejected. For instance, Asher ben Jehi'el asserted in his *Halakhot Qetanot* that one should pronounce the phrase “I write this scroll of Torah for the purpose of (*li-shmah*) the sanctity of the Torah of Moses”; however, he stated somewhat ambiguously that one was not required to utter these words when writing the divine names, but rather to concentrate on them, or pronounce them only in one’s mind.⁸

Ultimately, the requirement to vocalize a dedicatory formula prior to commencing the ritual writing made its way into Joseph Karo’s *Shulḥan ‘Arukh*, and hence into its Ashkenazi commentary by Moses Isserles of Kraków (*Mapah*). According to the recommendations in *Shulḥan ‘Arukh*, the artisan who prepares the parchment pronounces it while processing the writable skins—on this occasion, the work entails ‘*ibud li-shmah*.’⁹ A scribe, on the other hand, utters the formula prior to copying the Torah scroll and inscribing the divine name, whence the work is performed for the purpose of the sanctity (*le-shem kedushah*) of the Torah and the divine name.¹⁰ In his glosses to *Shulḥan ‘Arukh*, which were based on the local Ashkenazi customs and the extant legal tradition, Moses Isserles stated that some of the scholars claim that “it is enough to have in mind that the writing of

⁷ Barukh ben Isaac of Worms, *Sefer Terumah*, sections 190 and 192.

⁸ Asher ben Jehiel, *Halakhot Qetanot*, *Hilkhot Sefer Torah*, section 4.

⁹ *Yoreh De‘ah* 288:3–8: “A *priori* the hide needs to be made for the sake of mitsvah (*li-shmah*). But where if he’ll wait for hide that is made *li-shmah* he will be delayed to do the commandment, then he should write it on available hide that is not made *li-shmah* and perform the commandment immediately, while requesting hide that is made *li-shmah*”; *Yoreh De‘ah* 271:1–7: “The hides must be tanned by a Jew for the purposes of a Torah Scroll, that he [the tanner] will say at the beginning of the process, when he places them [the hides] into the lime, ‘I am tanning these hides for the purposes of a Torah Scroll.’”

¹⁰ *Yoreh De‘ah* 274:1, 276:2.

the *azkarot* [lit. “mentions,” i.e., appearances of the divine name in Scripture] was for their sake, since [the scribe] can rely on what he already said out loud when he began writing.” However, this kind of procedure by no means constituted an ideal practice.¹¹ Following the recommendation of *Or Zaru‘a*, Isserles argued that “if one starts to fall asleep, one should stop writing, since then the writing is not [executed] with intention (*be-kavanah*).” For Isserles, as was earlier the case for Maimonides (in *Mishneh Torah* 10:1), a Torah scroll could be disqualified from legal use if it had been written without intention (*kavanah*) or if its material support had been prepared unintentionally; that is, “not for the express purpose (*le-shem*) of being used as a scroll of the law.” Thus, even if early modern legal rulings accepted the possibility of a non-verbal sanctification of the object and the scribal work, the Ashkenazi legal authorities expressed a decided preference for the intentional formula—one that would transform the written matter into a sacred object—to include a sensory-auditory element.

2 Kabbalistic Intentionality and Scribal Work in Ashkenaz

The idea of purposeful, bodily, and intersubjectively verifiable action seems to have intersected across the premodern Ashkenazi scribal traditions with the notion of the proper intention and mental focus, with the two requirements collapsing to become a prerequisite for the process of making ritual textual objects. Having converged with the medieval Ashkenazi scribal traditions, and with the ultimate acceptance of the authority of *Shulḥan ‘Arukh* as the halakhic code in sixteenth-century Ashkenaz,¹² this prerequisite of both mental and sensorily engaged intentionality became a dominant mode for the conceptualizations of scribal performance till the later modern periods.

To be sure, there were also other scribal traditions, beyond the local Ashkenazi ones, on which scribal manual compilers could fall, especially those that pertained to the concept of scribal intention (*kavanah*). The talmudic references to the scribal craft already enable such an understanding of ritualized writing, whereby the

¹¹ *Mapah* on *Shulḥan ‘Arukh*, *Orakh Hayim* 32:19.

¹² See Joseph Davis, “The Reception of the *Shulḥan Arukh* and the Formation of Ashkenazic Jewish Identity,” *AJS Review* 26 (2002): 251–76.

concentration of the scribe's mind during the process of inscribing divine names determines the fittingness and legal status of the written textual object (BT *Git.* 54b). Later, Maimonides's directions for writing *STaM* included a pertinent element that seems to have had a major impact on the shaping of intentional writing sensitivity. Regarding the ritual status of the texts of *STaM*, *Mishneh Torah* states that those objects whose scribe failed to focus his mind during the writing process and inscribed any of the divine names (*azkarot*) improperly—that is, not “for their own sake,” *li-shman*—are unfit for liturgical use.¹³ This statement thus corroborates a collapsing gap between the understanding of the performances carried out selflessly, for their own sake and for the consecration of the act itself, and the intention, which elsewhere in *Mishneh Torah* (102b) Maimonides construes as the purity of the human mind from any extrinsic or alien thought during a ritual practice.

The widely accepted notion of the sanctity of the Hebrew language, and of divine names in particular, obviously amplifies the significance of ritual inscriptional acts within Jewish traditions, whether graphic or oral.¹⁴ This is especially true for traditions such as Kabbalah, which are anchored in linguistic conceptualizations of divine ontology. In these traditions, the Hebrew language, in all its facets, organizes practitioners' epistemic landscapes.¹⁵ While the divine name underlies the metaphysical order of being across the diversity of kabbalistic theosophies and underpins all the related

¹³ *Mishneh Torah*, Hilkhot Tefillin, Mezuzot, ve-Sefer Torah 1:15; 120b.

¹⁴ Elliot R. Wolfson, *Circle in the Square* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1995), 49–78; Wolfson, “From Sealed Book to Open Text: Time, Memory, and Narrativity in Kabbalistic Hermeneutics,” in *Interpreting Judaism in a Postmodern Age*, ed. Steven Kepnes (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 145–78; Moshe Idel, *Absorbing Perfections: Kabbalah and Interpretation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 45–79; Idel, “Infinites of Torah in Kabbalah,” in *Midrash and Literature*, ed. Geoffrey H. Hartman and Sanford Budick (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986), 143–44. Cf. Shaul Shaked, “Orality and Esotericism: Reflections on Modes of Transmission in Late Antiquity,” in *Orality and Textuality in the Iranian World: Patterns of Interaction across the Centuries*, ed. Julia Rabinovich (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 43–62.

¹⁵ Gershom Scholem, “The Name of God and the Linguistic Theory of the Kabbalah,” *Diogenes* 79 (1972): 59–194; Moshe Idel, “Reification of Language in Jewish Mysticism,” in *Mysticism of Language*, ed. Steven T. Katz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 42–79; Idel, “Defining Kabbalah: The Kabbalah of the Divine Names,” in *Mystics of the Book: Themes, Topics, and Typology*, ed. R.A. Herrera (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 97–122.

kabbalistic practices, the act of inscribing divine names acquires a special significance when infused with a kabbalistic understanding of language and its powers, since inscription effects a lasting change on both the divine organism and the materiality involved in that act.

As scholars have noted, the early kabbalistic traditions, culminating in the zoharic text, rendered this significance in erotic terms, casting the Tetragrammaton as the ideal form of the perfect male-female equilibrium: its first two letters represent the first couple, signifying two upper *sefirot* of Hokhmah and Binah, while its latter two letters represent a lower sefirotic pair of Tiferet and Malkhut-Shekhinah.¹⁶ By this conjunction, the Tetragrammaton encompasses the totality and the unity of the divine reality, which can be subsequently engendered and re-enacted by the act of inscription. Indeed, in the zoharic text, it is the writing of the divine name that may result in severe metaphysical consequences if inadequately performed. This unfortunate performance would leave the erring scribe incapable of reconnecting the *sefirot* and of disabling the flow of divine energies between them, and consequently, toward the lower world of humans and matter.¹⁷ In a rendition of this zoharic idea, Moses Cordovero's comment on the passage from the zoharic text (3:65b) asserted that "the body of the letters" written by the scribe was the material manifestation of spirituality (*ruhaniyyut*) and reflected the sefirotic organization of the divine body.¹⁸ Thus, from its outset, writing ought to ensue from the intention (*kavanah*), which is the mental-intellectual state of ascent from the corporeal to the spiritual level of being that allows for the proper flow of spirituality downwards to the material reality (that is, of the written letter and

¹⁶ See esp. Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, 74–78. Cf. *Zohar* 3:65b (trans. after Isaiah Tishby and Fischel Lachower, *The Wisdom of the Zohar: An Anthology of Texts*, trans. David Goldstein [Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1989], 1:347): "He said to him, Ele'azar, my son, from here onwards be warned not to write the Holy Name but appropriately, for the one who does not know to write the holy name appropriately [will not be able] to connect the bond of faith, [which is] the connection of one with another that unifies the Holy Name, and about him is written 'Because he has spurned the word of the Lord and violated His commandment, that person shall be cut off etc.' (Numbers 15:31)."

¹⁷ On intentionality and intentional acts of writing in the pre-Safedian and Safedian contexts, see Patrick B. Koch, *Human Self-Perfection: A Re-Assessment of Kabbalistic Musar-Literature of Sixteenth-Century Safed* (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2015), 109–19.

¹⁸ Moses Cordovero, *Or Yakar* (Jerusalem: Israel Halevi Elboim, 1985), 13:44.

word). So construed, the ritual writing of *STaM* produced material objects in which the spirituality drawn from the unified and balanced *sefirot* remained due to intentional scribal performance, since “the writing is corporeal and serves as a body for the intention.”¹⁹ In this, writing was comparable to the ritual of prayer or the pronouncing of the divine name, whereby the vocalized letters served as receptacles of divine influx and vehicles for its movement.²⁰ This reconceptualization of the earlier theories of the Hebrew language and letters thus subsumed the understanding of both inscription and pronunciation—two parallel acts included in the scribal performance—as embodied and intentional work that urged the presence of the divine force within the matter and material text-objects while depending on the scribe’s meticulous, uninterrupted, and intentional performance.

This simple yet powerful theosophical understanding of the productive power embedded in the process of writing the divine name undergirded many subsequent kabbalistic theorizations of natural and metaphysical realms as much as it steered contemporary kabbalistic hermeneutics, but it also underlay practical attitudes to textual objects.²¹ In continuation with the local customs of scribal

¹⁹ Cordovero, *Or Yakar*, 13:44.

²⁰ Cf. Moshe Idel, *Vocal Rites and Broken Theologies: Cleaving to Vocables in R. Israel Ba’al Shem Tov’s Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2020), 241–54.

²¹ On the “linguistic chain of being” as a prerequisite for Cordovero’s ideas on language and inscription, see Moshe Idel, “‘Letters of Thought’ (*otiyot mahshavah*) and ‘Primordial Intellect’: From Ecstatic Kabbalah to Hasidism,” in *Representing Jewish Thought: Proceedings of the 2015 Institute of Jewish Studies Conference Held in Honour of Professor Ada Rapoport-Albert*, ed. Agata Paluch (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 13–26; Idel, “On the Meanings of the Term Kabbalah: Between the Ecstatic Kabbalah and the Sefirotic Schools of Kabbalah in the 13th Century” [Hebrew], *Peamim* 93 (2003): 47–52; Idel, *Golem: Jewish Magical and Mystical Traditions on the Artificial Anthropoid* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1990), 196–203. On Cordovero’s magical penchant and its wider traction, especially in Central-Eastern Europe, see Moshe Idel, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1995), *passim*; Idel, “On Talismanic Language in Jewish Mysticism,” *Diogenes* 43, no. 170 (1995): 23–41; Bracha Sack, “An Investigation of the Influence of R. Moses Cordovero on Hasidism” [Hebrew], *Eshel Beer Sheva* 3 (1986): 229–46; Sack, “The Influence of Cordovero on Seventeenth-Century Jewish Thought,” in *Jewish Thought in the Seventeenth Century*, ed. Isadore Twersky and Bernard Septimus (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 365–79; Eugene Matanky, “Abridging *Pardes Rimomim* in Safed and Disseminating in Central Europe: Abraham Galante’s *Précis of Pardes Rimomim*,”

ritual writing were the practical recommendations and instructive stories that circulated in early modern Ashkenazi manuscripts, which were aimed at warning against scribal failures and shortcomings that could bear supernatural consequences. One such story, for instance, was recorded in an early seventeenth-century Ashkenazi non-square script and logged in a compilation of kabbalistic and halakhic textual units, which is only partially extant. The story recounts an event one night when a scribe (introduced in the first person as David bar Yosef “Devash mi-Sela”), upon delaying the end of his shift, finished his night’s work by writing the verse of Isa 13:21, “and demons shall dance there”:

And then I went to sleep. The next day, I awoke nearly two hours before dawn and returned to my work to write the book [of the Torah]. I opened my room and there I saw a man was sitting on my bench, holding the book [of the Torah] in his hand and reading. Oh, this man was so threatening! His face was like a burning fire, his hair radiant like gold, his eyes protruding. When I saw him, I was terrified. I stood there shaking and the fear became my destruction, until my soul nearly departed from me. Then he opened his mouth and called me by my name and said to me, “Know that you did not act correctly in that you stopped [writing] and stood up from your book while breaking exactly on this verse [from Isa 13:21], ‘and the demons (*se ‘irim*) shall dance there.’²² Because I am a harmful spirit, my name is ‘Page Keeper’²³—that means I wait on the pages and when teachers or

forthcoming; Andrea Gondos, *Kabbalah in Print: The Study and Popularization of Jewish Mysticism in Early Modernity* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2020), 90–101. On magical elements of Cordovero’s kabbalistic program, see Yoed Kadari, *Moses Cordovero’s Angels: Kabbalah and Magic* [Hebrew] (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2022), esp. 178–274.

²² In Rashi’s commentary on the Torah, Heb. *se ‘irim* stands for demons, or demonic forces; see Alexander Kulik, “How the Devil Got His Hoofs and Horns: The Origin of the Motif and the Implied Demonology of 3 *Baruch*,” *Numen* 60 (2013): 195–229. Cf. also Ephraim Kanarfogel, “Rashi’s Awareness of Jewish Mystical Literature and Traditions,” in *Raschi und sein Erbe. Internationale Tagung der Hochschule für Jüdische Studien mit der Stadt Worms*, ed. Daniel Krochmalnik, Hanna Liss, and Ronen Reichman (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2007), 23–34.

²³ Heb. *shomer dapin*, which in the codicological sense denotes a “catchword,” a word (or phrase) repeated at the end of a quire, folio, page, or column of text and at the beginning of the following one, preserving the order of the text.

scribes stand up from their book in the middle of a ‘wicked verse’ [i.e., a verse with a potential demonic connotation], I am ready to harm them. Now I came to harm you, but you should know that I have changed my mind, because I have heard good things about you in the world on high during the ten days of atonement. But you must promise me that you will not write anything, even one letter, from now until the [festival of] Shavu’ot.” I did so and promised him, and kept the promise, that I would not write even one thing, small or large, until Shavu’ot, and so he went away as he took from me and was no more.²⁴

This short textual unit records an account that reached the seventeenth-century scribe—who remained anonymous, but identified his place of writing as Brisk of Lita (Brześć Litewski, today in Belarussia)—from at least three independent sources: a written manuscript gloss in Rashi’s biblical commentary, recounted orally by the scribe’s teacher (Isaac Eyzik bar Joseph ha-Levi); the scribe’s father-in-law David Tuns; and a copy of an otherwise unidentified book that the scribe had found locally in Brisk. The story, embedded in a collection of mystical and kabbalistic excerpts, evokes the warnings endorsed by *Shulkhan ‘Arukh* and Moses Isserles, amongst others, against working while in a state of drowsiness, as this can result not only in a sloppy performance (for instance, acting against the custom that prohibits breaking the work of writing a Torah scroll on a verse that mentions any impurity or negative force), but also in a lack of the proper intention that is required to imbue the written object with its performative, ritual power. In its narrative adaptation, the metaphysical consequence of error turns into tangible, physical danger for the inattentive human being whose daily work and life unfolds between the many forces of good and evil that inhabited early modern Ashkenaz. The requirement of attentiveness and untainted intention seems absolute, as even a catchword at the bottom of the page—an unassuming feature of a handmade book that keeps its text in order—could symbolically, and perhaps to the mind of the contemporary reader, also in actuality, turn into a demonic force that would haunt the scribe forever.

²⁴ MS New York, Jewish Theological Seminary 8558, f. 9r; also preserved in a short rendition in MS Prague, Jewish Museum 478, f. 30v.

Thus, besides emphasizing the authority of a learned scribe over the creation and management of the powerful *STaM* objects, the story—which, according to the source, “ought to be known to teachers and scribes who engage with the Torah so that they will not be harmed”—supplemented an auto-corrective and ethical layer to the broader scribal laws, reflecting the state of anxiety about the autonomy of powerful objects and their makers in contemporary society. It appears that increased awareness about controlling *STaM* production resulted in heightened ethical and intellectual pressure that only the most capable craftspeople could bear. The moral co-constitution of the magical or apotropaic power of the objects and the craftsperson that resulted from the object’s dependence on the scribe’s intentional, sensorial, and attentive intellectual performance brought forth a particular moral and educational ideal that aimed at the few within the elite community of the scholars in Ashkenaz-Poland. Even though many *soferim* could aspire to produce *STaM* objects of quality, stories about the negative metaphysical outcomes of scribal errors and ignorance participated in popularizing the ideal of the intentional act of writing, increasingly supported by the kabbalistic ethos, as that which could render the ritual textual object uniquely fit for use. At the same time, these stories contributed just as much to the general perception of *STaM* as objects of apotropaic potency as to their creation.

3 Scribal Laws and the Writing of Amulets in Premodern Ashkenaz

The use of *tefillin* and *mezuzot* as amulets has been enjoyed in various Jewish communities since antiquity, based on the fundamental belief in the sheer power of the divine name.²⁵ These objects were worn on

²⁵ 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; Meir Bar-Ilan, “The Writing of Torah Scrolls, *Tefillin*, *Mezuzot*, and Amulets on Deer Skin” [Hebrew], *Beth Mikra* 30 (1984/85): 375–81, cf. Martin L. Gordon, “Mezuzah: Protective Amulet or Religious Symbol?,” *Tradition* 16, no. 4 (1977): 7–40; Catherine Hezser, *Jewish Literacy in Roman Palestine* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), 213; Oded Israeli, “The Mezuzah as an Amulet: Directions and Trends in the Zohar,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 22 (2015): 137–61; Gideon Bohak, “Mezuzot 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.

the body or hung on doorframes and were treated as items of daily use and experience that protected individuals and households from any potential harm. In the premodern Ashkenazi world, these textual objects were believed to acquire and retain their special apotropaic status because they were validated by intentional and sensory performance—of both inscription and utterance—by a qualified scribe during a minutely prescribed process of production. This performance, executed *for its own sake* and with special mental focus, was regarded as imbuing objects with divine energy, a process that occurred under human control. As I will argue, controlling the production of powerful textual objects relied not only on implementing a regime of spiritual ritualization, but also on internalizing and intellectualizing the physical, artisanal, and scribal labor and materials related to such work. Consequently, the inscribed matter, through the writing process that built on the conjunction of speech and intentional thought, could equally participate in both the material and the mental, conscious worlds. Even more significantly for the daily life of the objects and their users, the textual object could retain its enduring affective power as an actualization of the primary divine text (in its gist, the biblical text condensed to the divine name) accomplished through its particular and collectively recognizable material disposition and shape.

A critical text for shaping the ideals of intentional scribal work and the crafting of powerful *STaM* objects was a compilation of texts known today as *Barukh she-amar*, one of the first lengthy Central European scribal handbooks. Its main parts were written and compiled between the late thirteenth century and the early fifteenth century,²⁶ while the entire compilation was in wide circulation by the sixteenth century. It encompasses four initially independent textual layers: a short guide to writing *tefillin* (*Tikun Tefillin*, at times referred to as *Tikun Soferim*) attributed to Abraham ben Moses of Sinsheim; glosses to *Tikun Tefillin* that constitute the actual *Barukh she-amar*, that is, the commentary of Sinsheim's disciple, Samson ben Eliezer of Prague (nicknamed "Barukh she-amar"); a kabbalistic commentary on the shapes of letters in the form of four lists, *Sefer* (or *Seder*) *Alfa Beta*, attributed to Yom Tov Lipmann Mühlhausen (chiefly based on mystical texts such as *Sefer ha-Temunah*, *Sefer ha-Bahir*, *Otsar ha-Kavod*,

²⁶ Printed as such in Shklov in 1884, later included in *Kovets Sifre STaM* (Jerusalem: Makhon Ha-Talmud Ha-Israeli, 1970).

Sefer ha-Rokeah, and *Sefer ha-Otiyot*); and a short list of the shapes of letters anonymously commenting on the preceding part, *Sefer Alfa Beta*.²⁷ The main part of this compilation centers on the entire procedure for making ritual textual objects followed by professional scribes—from choosing an adequate calf skin to processing it for parchment to the letterforms and the writing of texts containing divine names.²⁸ According to the version of *Tikun Soferim* contained therein, and following the apparent local Ashkenazi custom of verbalizing one’s intention that should precede each of the actions in the process of making a ritual text-object, the scribe ought to utter the formula “for [the purpose of] the sanctity of the Torah of Israel, for [the purpose of] *tefillin*, *mezuzot*, and *qeme ‘in*, I....”²⁹ The guide explicitly emphasizes that “it is not sufficient to utter [this] in [one’s] mind.”³⁰ The recurrence of this formula before each stage of crafting a text points to a crucial moment in the story of powerful textual objects in Ashkenaz. For one, it is not only the regular liturgical objects defined as *STaM* that should undergo a process of careful, intentional processing and thereby sanctification; text-objects subsumed under the category of *qeme ‘in*—that is, containers that hold

²⁷ The title most frequently recorded in the early modern Ashkenazi manuscripts reads *Seder Alfa Beta*, presumably because it follows the alphabetical order of commenting on the matter of letters (e.g., MS Oxford, Bodleian Library, Mich. 36, f. 200r), but the text is known in modern scholarship under the title *Sefer Alfa Beta*. The text circulated in handwritten Ashkenazi copies throughout the early modern period, often separately from *Barukh she-amar*. See, e.g., MS Copenhagen, Royal Danish Library, Cod. Sim. Hebr. 71, ff. 173r–178r (dated 1552); MS Oxford, Bodleian Library, Mich. 36, ff. 200r–204v (dated 1644); MS Oxford, Bodleian Library, Opp. 529, ffs. 11v–15r; MS Oxford, Bodleian Library, Opp. 520, ffs. 36r–40r; MS Oxford, Bodleian Library, Opp. 403, ffs. 1r–4v. On *Sefer Alfa Beta*, see Judah Kaufmann, *Rabbi Jom Tov Lipmann Mühlhausen* [Hebrew] (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1927); Israel M. Ta-Shma, “Towards a Characterisation of Fourteenth-Century German Rabbinic Literature” [Hebrew], *Alei Sefer* 4 (1977): 20–41; Israel Yuval, “Magie und Kabbala unter den Juden im Deutschland des ausgehenden Mittelalters,” in *Judentum im deutschen Sprachraum*, ed. Karl E. Grözinger (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991), 173–89; Annett Martini, *Arbeit des Himmels: Jüdische Konzeptionen rituellen Schreibens in der europäischen Kultur des Mittelalters* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022), 267–94.

²⁸ Cf. Bar-Ilan, “The Writing of Torah Scrolls.”

²⁹ See, e.g., MS Oxford, Bodleian Library, Mich. 225, f. 2v. The text lists *tefillin*, *mezuzot*, and *qeme ‘in*, the latter later identified in the *Barukh she-amar* gloss as a leather container that holds the text-object and whose making also requires performance “for its own sake,” see f. 3v.

³⁰ MS Oxford, Bodleian Library, Mich. 225, f. 2v.

pieces of written parchment of *tefillin*—also required identical production methods and intentional sanctification.³¹ These objects would be subject to the same scribal legislation, which regulated the pre-writing stages of the preparation of the required materials and the processes of inscribing letters on them. Moreover, according to the medieval Ashkenazi codifiers, all of the listed objects—including those that lay beyond the spectrum of texts whose manufacture was regulated by early rabbinic literature—would require the same type of mental and physical labor, subsumed under the notion of “intention” (*kavanah*) or “sanctification for its own sake” (*li-shmah*).³² Thus, *keme'in*, understood as both phylacteries and “amulets”—that is, those container-objects that embraced formulas inscribed with divine names—were subsumed under the rubric of ritual textual items alongside *tefillin* and *mezuzot*, whose making could legally and effectively be legitimized through the scribal act of intentional—mental and verbal—dedication.

The conceptualization of texts as objects designed to capture and channel the elements of divinity through the intentional inscription of divine names was more widespread than merely a single instance of a practice prescribed in a scribal manual, even one as complex as *Barukh she-amar*. The ubiquity of this idea within the material and textual culture of late medieval Ashkenaz is well documented in the richest record of Western Ashkenazi pietistic-mystical traditions, the twelfth- to thirteenth-century *Sefer Ḥasidim*.³³ This text also preserved

³¹ The root *qm* ‘ most generally denotes “tying” and thus objects that can be tied or bound (cf. T *Kelim*, *Bava Metsia* 6:1), also those that contain non-written items (cf. T *Šabb.* 4:9, BT *Šabb.* 61a–b).

³² On amulet-objects in the pre-medieval Jewish world, see, e.g., Joseph Naveh, “Illnesses and Amulets in Antiquity,” in *Illness and Healing in Ancient Times*, ed. Ofra Rimon (Haifa: Haifa University Press, 1997), 24–28; Joseph Naveh and Shaul Shaked, *Amulets and Magic Bowls: Aramaic Incantations of Late Antiquity*, 2nd ed. (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1987); Shaul Shaked, “Incantation Bowls and Amulet Tablets: How to Get Rid of Demons and Harmful Beings” [Hebrew], *Qadmoniyot* 129 (2005): 2–12; Lawrence H. Schiffman and Michael D. Swartz, *Hebrew and Aramaic Incantation Texts from the Cairo Geniza: Selected Amulets from Box K1* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991); Gideon Bohak, “Art and Power in Ancient Magical Gems and Amulets,” *Art and Culture Magazine* 12 (2004): 4–11; Bohak, *Ancient Jewish Magic: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), esp. 63, 115–23; Yuval Harari, *Jewish Magic before the Rise of Kabbalah* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2017), 216–30.

³³ For the most recent state-of-the-art in the study of *Sefer Ḥasidim*, see Elisheva Baumgarten, Elisabeth Hollender, and Ephraim Shoham-Steiner, eds., “*Sefer*

the concept of the verbal-auditory authorization of power of written words, particularly divine names. In several passages concerning the copying of books by Jewish scribes, the relatively common medieval practice of reading the textual model aloud before writing it down—that is, self-dictation of the text to be copied—served as a sort of protective measure for the scribe.³⁴ It ensured that the written text was heard by the divine as a form of prayer and that the scribe's work would be rewarded by God's blessing.³⁵ The act of reciting text before copying it not only helped scribes to achieve a proper state of focus and to memorize the text, but it was also believed to have the power to ward off demons. Thus, reciting the written text before copying it served as a form of protective adjuration, infusing the words with additional power. This practice of tokenizing written texts, especially divine names, was common and recurrent in *Sefer Ḥasidim*, even though the making and use of amulets was generally considered ominous by the text's compilers.³⁶ However, within the realm of scribal law and under certain circumstances, the protective power of objects intentionally inscribed with divine names was unquestioned and unquestionable. Another passage in *Sefer Ḥasidim* states that while a scribe was not expected to utter or focus on the special dedicatory formula before writing *STaM* texts, they were still required to note it down on a piece of parchment and place it next to them. This piece of parchment would thus become imbued with special powers channelled via the scribal intention and could be used as a form of apotropaic object, although the text of *Sefer Ḥasidim* did not provide any detailed recommendations for this practice.

Whilst the graphic disposition and ritual making of *STaM* texts was well regulated by the rabbinic authorities by the late medieval period, the crafting of amulets that were beyond the scope of *STaM*

Ḥasidim: Book, Context, and Afterlife: Studies in Honor of Ivan G. Marcus," special issue, *Jewish History* 34, nos. 1–3 (2021): 1–258.

³⁴ E.g., MS Parma, Biblioteca Palatina, Parm. 3280 H, f. 71r (par. 733 according to the online edition, the Princeton University *Sefer Ḥasidim* Database, https://etc.princeton.edu/sefer_hasidim), f. 158v (par. 1763).

³⁵ In another instance, the writing process should be witnessed and acknowledged by a "quorum," or at least by two scribes, adding to the intersubjective authority of the text.

³⁶ On the complex attitudes to magic and the practical uses of divine names in the environment of the compilers of *Sefer Ḥasidim*, see Ephraim Kanarfogel, "Peering through the Lattices": *Mystical, Magical, and Pietistic Dimensions in the Tosafist Period* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000), 208–20, 221–49.

lay somewhat in the liminal sphere between prohibited and permitted actions, crossing the boundary either way depending on the local constellations of knowledge and power. The texts of *Sefer Ḥasidim* provide a clear example of this ambivalent attitude toward amulet-making: while some text-objects can achieve amulet status, using and relying upon them was generally not advised. Yet the scribal manual *Barukh she-amar* clearly concatenated instructions for making *STaM* with those for producing other types of objects that exuded power. It differentiated between these objects while ascribing to them an equal authoritative status that derived from the same regulations and expectations for crafting them.³⁷

4 Nahmanides' Amulet and Intentional Scribal Practice in Early Modern Ashkenazi Manuals

Many recipes and instructions for making amulets have survived in late medieval and early modern Ashkenazi handwritten books.³⁸ Among the variety of instructions for crafting amulets, short manuals detailing the writing and graphic layout of amulet texts that emulated the rules for making *tefillin* and *mezuzot* are crucial for understanding the broader material context of premodern kabbalistic culture in East-Central Europe. These manuals not only offer insight into the technical aspects of amulet creation but also reflect the spiritual and cultural values of the communities that produced them. Notably, some of the amulet-making instructions that were popularized in early modern Ashkenazi recipe books blended elements of halakhic regulations and local scribal customs for making ritual text-objects (*STaM*) with kabbalistic and practical kabbalistic principles of

³⁷ On the requirement of an appropriate psychological and moral disposition on the part of the scribes reflected in *Sefer Ḥasidim* and their milieu, see Annett Martini, "The Ritualization of Manufacturing and Handling Holy Books by the Hasidei Ashkenaz between Halakah and Magic," in *Ritual Dynamics in Jewish and Christian Contexts: Between Bible and Liturgy*, ed. Claudia D. Bergmann and Benedikt Kranemann (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 67–73; see also Joseph Dan, "The Book of the Divine Name by Rabbi Eleazar of Worms," *Frankfurter Judaistische Beiträge* 22 (1995): 27–60; Elliot R. Wolfson, "The Mystical Significance of Torah Study in German Pietism," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 85 (1993): 43–78.

³⁸ On the proliferation of handwritten and printed books of (practical) recipes in early modern East-Central Europe, including recipes for making amulets, see Agata Paluch, "Intentionality and Kabbalistic Practices in Early Modern East-Central Europe," *Aries* (2019): 83–111.

intentional embodied performances. This blend accommodated popular needs for material objects of power for daily use within a well-sanctioned tradition of crafting unique, and often deluxe, ritual text items.

A typical example of such instructions circulated in early modern Ashkenazi manuscripts, becoming a staple in major practical kabbalistic textual compilations.³⁹ In these manuscripts, the instructions were attributed to Nahmanides, a thirteenth-century Geronese kabbalist (1194–1270), who ostensibly received its design and related performative guidelines from Meir of Rothenburg (Maharam, ca. 1215–1293), a famous Ashkenazi halakhic scholar.⁴⁰ In the majority of the extant sources, the instruction consists of three parts: a detailed design for the amulet and its container attributed to Nahmanides and Maharam, performative guidelines for using it ascribed to Maharam, and a prayer for activating its power by Yitshak Mor Hayim (a Spanish kabbalist active in Italy in the late fifteenth century).⁴¹ Regarding the latter part, Gershom Scholem noted that the text includes traditions from the generation of kabbalists that was active just before the expulsion from Spain and in circulation between the Iberian and Italian Peninsulas.⁴² Scholem also observed that these traditions reflected the magical tendencies of the circles from which they originated and that more of them may yet be recovered from many practical kabbalistic compilations that (still) await further

³⁹ MS Moscow, Russian State Library, Günsburg 302, ff. 125–126; MS Oxford, Bodleian Library, Opp. 521, ff. 72r–76v; MS Jerusalem, National Library of Israel, 8 1070, ff. 92v–96v; MS Oxford, Bodleian Library, Opp. 485, ff. 105v–111r.

⁴⁰ On attributing magical traditions to important rabbis and figures of great learning, see 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, Tradition, Diaspora*, ed. Ra’anan Boustán, Oren Kosansky, and Marina Rustow (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 58–79; in the context of Ashkenazi traditions attributed to Nahmanides, see Kanarfogel, “Peering through the Lattices”, 246.

⁴¹ On Yitshak Mor Hayim and his extant writings see Ya’el Nadav, “An Epistle of the Qabbalist R. Isaac Mar Hayyim Concerning the Doctrine of ‘Supernal Lights,’” *Tarbiz* 26 (1957): 440–58 (Hebrew); Moshe Idel, “Memento Dei—Remarks on Remembering in Judaism,” in *Il senso della memoria: Atti dei convegni Lincei*, vol. 195 (Rome: Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 2003), 143–92; Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah in Italy, 1280–1510: A Survey* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 198, 213–18, 222–25.

⁴² Gershom Scholem, “The Kabbalistic Responsa of R. Yosef Alcastiel to R. Yehuda Hayyat” [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 24 (1955): 167–206.

cataloguing.⁴³ As current knowledge suggests, all known copies of Yitshak Mor Hayim's prayer, as well as the amulet-making instructions attributed to Nahmanides and Maharam that precede it, appear in postmedieval Ashkenazi practical kabbalistic codices. Even if the authorial attributions of these texts are questionable and have little evidence to support them, linking amulet-writing guidelines either directly or indirectly to Maharam—the celebrated Ashkenazi legal authority whose school produced a lineage of scholars refining scribal laws and contributing to the texts of *Barukh she-amar*—appears to have been significant to the copyists and readers of these instructions in early modern Ashkenaz.⁴⁴ Even if spurious, the authorial lineage tracing back to the experts in scribal law was not accidental: the amulet was not only meant to visually resemble *tefillin*, but also had to be written according to rules that emulated the scribal laws for writing them.

The earliest known copy of these amulet-making instructions features in a sixteenth-century Ashkenazi manuscript manual for preparing amulets found within a complex composite codex.⁴⁵ It includes an exact model of an amulet signed by a scribe, Matatiah, which must be strictly followed in order to assure that the resulting object will be fully potent. The design stretches along the longer edge of the page horizontally, on both recto and verso, near the outer margin.⁴⁶ On the first (verso) side, the text instructs that the amulet formula consists of two sides, the inner parchment and the outer wrapping, which should be written in parallel in such a way that one matches the other when they are folded together. The textual formula comprises four lines per side (numbered 1 to 4 on the left side of the outer formula), and hence the amulet often features in sources titled "The Amulet of Four Lines." Each line corresponds to a specific power granted to the amulet's user: protection and success, grace, love, and respect among all people, respectively. Each line also consists of two or three biblical verses, with each verse standing for a *sefirah* on which the maker of the amulet should focus while writing: Keter, Ḥokhmah,

⁴³ Scholem, "The Kabbalistic Responsa," 168, n. 10.

⁴⁴ *Tiqun tefillin*, the earliest layer of *Barukh she-amar*, is attributed to Abraham ben Moses of Sinsheim (d. 1320), a pupil of Meir ben Barukh of Rothenburg.

⁴⁵ MS Moscow, Russian State Library, Günsburg 302, f. 125.

⁴⁶ Other known copies of the text provide the same design for the amulet accompanied by instructions, but not a close model of it. Cf. MS Jerusalem, National Library of Israel, 8 1070, f. 92v.

and Binah (Ps 42:9, 69:14, and 34:5), Gedulah and Gevurah (Ps 31:3 and 70:2), Tiferet, Netsah, and Hod (109:21, 77:15, and 106:8), and Yesod and Malkhut (Isa 12:2 and 71:12). Moreover, the four lines encompass the letters of the forty-two-letter divine name and those of the name of 151. The latter refers to the name Ehyeh when spelled in full with the letter *heh*, whose simple numerical value equals twenty-one; that is, the amount of the mentions of the divine name in *tefillin*. In this way, the formula curiously resembles a single unit of a text model for the head *tefillin*. (At this point, the scribe reminds his readers that the text is only a model and not an actual text-object copied into a codex, as the actual object should contain the divine name “per se” and not the word “ha-shem” or any other placeholder.)

Importantly, the amulet is surrounded by a sort of magical-kabbalistic *didascalia*. In MS Moscow, Russian State Library, Günstzburg 302, this includes a set of vertically arranged explanations on the manner of writing the textual formula, as well as additional horizontally arranged adjuration formulae to be recited in order to activate the amulet for a particular purpose.⁴⁷ Thus, the first and last letters of the four lines of the amulet form the Tetragrammaton, which should be graphically distinguished by the use of larger square letters. The short vertical notes recommend using special letter shapes normally used as line-fillers at the end of the line or word in the standard square script, but in such a way that the length of each verse line is exactly the same on each side of the crafted object. According to the instructions, both the first and the last letter of each line should be written after the line is complete, with intention directed to the designated *sefirah*. Moreover, each of the elongated forms should overlap with a parallel word designated on the wrapping of the amulet. This was not only a matter of aesthetics, but also practicality, as the object was to be folded, with the wrapping covering the inscribed part, when used. The graphical arrangement is significant because the inscribed material carried the meaning of the text inscribed on each side of the folio. Both the graphic format and the layout of the text copied according to the recommended formula determine the text’s efficacy and inherent significance. (It is highly ironic that just under the copied amulet model, the scribe of MS Moscow, Russian State Library, Günstzburg 302 had to provide a

⁴⁷ In other copies of the amulet instructions, these are either arranged in the margins or follow the design of the amulet.

correction to his own copying mistake. He admits to unintentionally swapping the second and third lines, an error that would require attention and correction if the actual prescribed amulet were to yield any results.)

After the design and instructions for writing the amulet, the text features a set of four instructions for how to use it that are attributed to Meir of Rothenburg.⁴⁸ The first set instructs that it is both the visual layout of the verses and the recitation formula performed by the scribe—in continuation with premodern scribal laws emergent in Ashkenaz that required the scribe to recite a dedicatory intentional formula—that make the amulet fit for use, since the vocalization of divine names, on which the scribal intention rested, was defined as “the essence of all the hidden actions.”⁴⁹ Secondly, the parchment should then be folded and worn around the neck to stimulate the amulet’s power beyond its “regular” apotropaic function; that is, of protecting a person from fear and danger during travel. To activate the amulet, one was instructed to hold it in one’s hands and focus one’s intention on three verses from the Bible. If it was not possible to hold the amulet, then one could visualize or repeat the three verses and the corresponding divine name (Ehyeh) contained in the amulet three times and “it will help him, via the *intention* of the amulet.”⁵⁰ This intentional process could apparently also prove useful if a person was summoned for questioning by state officials, with the recitation of verses limited to one if the official state matter was not too pressing. The third set of Maharam’s instructions describes the creation of a four-line amulet, but on new paper and for an entirely different purpose; namely, cursing an enemy.⁵¹ Not only do the

⁴⁸ MS Moscow, Russian State Library, Günzburg 302, f. 125r–v; MS Oxford, Bodleian Library, Opp. 521, f. 72r; MS Jerusalem, National Library of Israel, 8 1070, f. 93r–v.

⁴⁹ Cf. MS Oxford, Bodleian Library, Opp. 521, f. 72r, MS Jerusalem, National Library of Israel, 8 1070, f. 93r.

⁵⁰ MS Moscow, Russian State Library, Günzburg 302, f. 125v. Other copies of the instruction simplify the instruction to intentions toward the names contained in the written verses and the Tetragrammaton with a specified vocalization pattern. See, e.g., MS Jerusalem, National Library of Israel, 8 1070, f. 93r.

⁵¹ The advice to write the amulet on paper confirms that an attribution to the thirteenth-century figure is rather late, since paper as writing support had not yet become popularized in Central Europe at the time. See Józef Dąbrowski, “Paper Manufacture in Central and Eastern Europe before the Introduction of Paper-Making Machines,” 38, <http://www.paperhistory.org/dabro.pdf>, last accessed May 10, 2024.

material support and recitation formulae differ, but the instruction also reflects a much more complex net of interconnections between the amulet and the preparatory procedures for its activation—such as fasting and pronouncing the *herem* on the enemy in the synagogue while holding a Torah scroll in one’s hands—upon which the amulet’s efficacy hinges.

Finally, the last set of instructions recommends that the amulet be used by women in difficult labor. In this case, it should be written “for the sake of the woman” (*le-shem ha-ishah*), with three lines and a different vocalization of the divine name. The amulet-maker is instructed to use parchment made from an animal fetus (*qelaf shelil*), inscribed in square script (*ketivah ashurit*) on one side and in “continuous” (non-square or “semi-cursive” script) on the other, after ten days of fasting and at the time of the evening prayer. Crucially, the amulet ought to be written with appropriate spacing between letters and on correctly ruled writing support “according to the laws of *tefillin*.” Moreover, the writer’s intention should be focused “for the sake of the amulet and its actions” (*le-shem ha-kame’a vehape’ulot*), just as the writer of *tefillin* and other *STaM* objects would focus on writing *for their sake* in order to consecrate them as ritually operable objects. The following intentions set for the amulet-writer focus on the fourteen enlarged letterforms contained in the amulet. Here, the vocalization sign under the first letter of each of the ten biblical verses of the four-line amulet formula, which stem from ten different biblical verses quoted therein, indicates a different level of the decadic structure of the *sefirot*, one that should be focused on by the scribe while preparing the text-object or by the practitioner while using the it (first verse: *holam-Keter*, second: *tsere-Hokhmah*, third: *qamats-Binah*, fourth: *segol-Tiferet*, etc.).

The fourteen larger letters of the amulet—ten on the inner parchment and four on the outer wrapping—comprise the key to its efficacy, standing for the divine name and distinct divine aspects that the practitioner activates with appropriate intention while writing. If performed correctly and intentionally, the writing process imbues the material objects with potency, but the activation of the amulet also requires intentional effort on its dedicatee’s part in order to work. Therefore, the instructions for making the four-line amulet in all extant copies precede a prayer by Yitshak Mor Hayim, which guides the practitioner to focus their intention on the graphic arrangement of the four lines, the ten *sefirot* alluded to in the verses contained in the lines, and the Tetragrammaton (with variant

vocalizations) formed by the first and last letters of the lines. This intentional prayer is meant to reactivate the channels of divine flow instilled in the material object during its making and to stimulate the flow of divine energy between the *sefirot* and toward the practitioner, enabling the amulet to exercise its protective power over its user and wearer. According to the final instruction, the potential practitioner should always begin the process of making the amulet by uttering an adjuration of the angels Michael and Taftafiyah, “to protect the wearer from any curse or evil struck, and it will be extended according to his wishes.”⁵² The final formula of the instructions emphasizes the ultimate authority of the text-object. As the copyist states: “It was transmitted to me orally that one needs to make a hole in the amulet and [one also needs] a pure intention (*kavanah zakhah*).”

The efficacy of the four-line amulet thus depended on several requirements echoing those included in the scribal laws and the professional manuals for producing the ritual texts of *STaM* that were emergent in premodern Ashkenaz. These requirements included the specific graphic layout of the text, the appropriate and adequately prepared material support, the oral formulae uttered before the making of the artifact, and the mental focus, or *intention*, directed at the divine names, especially during the act of writing. In essence, the creation of the amulet emerges as an embodied and spiritual act that married elements of halakhic tradition, kabbalistic intentionality, and meticulous craftsmanship. In effect, this act transformed ordinary materials into powerful objects imbued with divine energy. It reflected the belief in the interconnectedness between the divine and the mundane, contingent on human effort and skill that could be regulated by both ritual scribal protocols and individual intellectual and spiritual prowess. The final product—a kabbalistic amulet—thus materialized as a testament to its maker’s spiritual alignment and devotional practice. It was legitimized by the longstanding legal traditions and customs that were foundational to the cultural identity of Ashkenaz, overlaid with kabbalistic practice and a kabbalistic-sefirotic web of meanings. In this way, the circulation of the amulet instructions attributed to both Nahmanides and Meir of Rothenburg in late Ashkenazi practical kabbalistic compilations attests to the long process of integrating various esoteric strands into the local religious and legal culture, predicated on the authority of continuity, tradition, and belonging.

⁵² MS Moscow, Russian State Library, Günsburg 302, f. 126r.

5 Conclusions: Ashkenazi Scribal Laws and the Intentional Writing of Amuletic Objects

The arts of crafting and writing powerful textual objects—*STaM* on the one hand and amulets on the other—had much in common in late medieval and early Renaissance Ashkenaz. This affinity went beyond the use of *mezuzot* and *tefillin* as apotropaic devices. Both of these types of text-objects were performative in a dual sense: they required special preparation procedures and they were also intended to act in specific, pre-defined ways upon their handlers and users after being created. The creation and efficacy of these textual objects depended on the deliberate efforts of their makers. These efforts brought out the hidden supernatural element, in harmony with the material artifact, through inscribed and bodily enacted text. Intentional performances were not unique to kabbalists, but it was in kabbalistic language and practice that this type of ritual behavior reached a peak.⁵³ As a layer of intensification added to any normative religious practice dictated by rabbinic law, *kavanot* became equivalent to intense mental focus: an imaginative-linguistic exercise centered on divine attributes, especially those conceived of as divine names. They were equally deployable during the halakhically required rituals and during other, often pragmatically oriented performances.

By the seventeenth century, Kabbalah enthusiasts in East-Central Europe had access to various textualized guidelines and practical customs, both local and global, related to intentional writing practices. These resources helped to refract those new conceptualizations of intentions (*kavanot*) and the writing of text-objects, which at the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth century began to trickle into Ashkenaz from the

⁵³ Moshe Idel, "Performance, Intensification, and Experience in Jewish Mysticism," *Archaeus* 13 (2009): 95–136; Idel, "The Intention of Prayer in the Beginning of Kabbalah: Between Germany and Provence" [Hebrew], in *Porat Yosef: Studies Presented to Rabbi Dr. Joseph Safran*, ed. Bezalel and Eliyahu Safran (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1992), 5–14; Idel, *Enchanted Chains: Techniques and Rituals in Jewish Mysticism* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Shalom Hartman Institute, 2015), 83–85, 137–53, 170–74; Jonathan Garb, *Manifestations of Power in Jewish Mysticism* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2005), 223–24; Koch, *Human Self-Perfection*, 104–31; Maurizio Mottolose, *Bodily Rituals in Jewish Mysticism: The Intensification of Cultic Hand Gestures by Medieval Kabbalists* (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2016), 234–62; Uri Safrai, "'Worship of the Heart' in the Kabbalah of the Sixteenth Century" (PhD diss., Ben-Gurion University, 2016).

emerging centres of kabbalistic study in Palestinian Safed and which soon thereafter engulfed much of its intellectual landscape.⁵⁴ Arguably, they did so because the early scribal regulations and customs for producing *STaM* objects that had developed in premodern Ashkenaz emphasized intentional writing performance, one that required both verbalized dedicatory formulas and focused mental effort. These practices sanctified the writing process and its effects, endowing the material object with a ritually fit status through intentional scribal work. The kabbalistic concepts of intentional prayer and performance that were overlaid onto the scribal act added a kabbalistic theorization to the existing practical rules. This formed a basis for the spread of various kabbalistically informed theories of writing, particularly those that highlighted the significance of intentional scribal work in producing material objects imbued with lasting divine power, used for magical and protective purposes. While various instructions and recipes for amulet-making survived in premodern how-to books—especially those linking amulet-making with astrological knowledge and talisman crafting—those manuals modelled on the scribal laws for writing *STaM* objects enjoyed long circulation among late medieval and early modern practitioners in Ashkenaz. Recipes for amulets crafted according to the rules of writing *STaM* appeared alongside those recommending *STaM* objects—increasingly to be written by learned kabbalistic scribes—as effective apotropaic objects. The instructions for making the kabbalistic four-line amulet that were attributed to Nahmanides and Maharam thus found their counterparts in many Ashkenazi copies of recipes for writing amulets using elements of *STaM* traditions. These included written amulets wearable in place of *tefillin*,⁵⁵ those written “according to the laws of writing a Torah Scroll,”⁵⁶ in *ketivah tamah* (appropriate for writing *STaM*) and with the proper intention *for its*

⁵⁴ On the beginnings of Lurianic Kabbalah in Ashkenaz, see Jacob Elbaum, *Openness and Insularity: Late Sixteenth Century Jewish Literature in Poland and Ashkenaz* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1990), 183–222; Moshe Idel, ‘One from a Town, Two from a Clan: The Diffusion of Lurianic Kabbalah and Sabbateanism, a Re-Examination,’ *Jewish History* 7 (1993): 79–104; Yosef Avivi, *Kabbalah Luriana* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 2008), 1: 436–40, 551–56; Elchanan Reiner, “A Biography of an Agent of Culture: Eleazar Altschul of Prague and His Literary Activity,” in *Schöpferische Momente des europäischen Judentums in der frühen Neuzeit*, ed. Michael Graetz (Heidelberg: Winter, 2000).

⁵⁵ E.g., MS Liverpool, Merseyside Country Museum, M12074, f. 118r.

⁵⁶ MS Kyiv, The Vernadsky National Library of Ukraine, Heb. 178, f. 48r.

own sake,⁵⁷ alongside more popular recipes recommending the use of *STaM* objects to destroy evil spirits.⁵⁸

The story of *STaM* objects in premodern Ashkenaz encapsulates the movement from making an everyday object imbued with divine power via a regular scribal-artisanal ritual to constructing an object regulated by the elite whose working hinges on the controlled behaviour of a learned and morally untainted scribe. This story emphasizes the rough travels of powerful text-objects—amulets and *STaM* alike—between contending realms of power, labor, and hierarchy. If the making of amulet devices was to depend on strict scribal regulations, then *STaM* objects, as apotropaic devices *par excellence*, were to be confined to an even stricter framework demarcated by the elite learned knowledge of the time. *Tefillin* and *mezuzot* have been used as amulets in various Jewish communities since antiquity, based on the fundamental belief in the sheer power of the divine name. In the premodern Ashkenazi world, these textual objects were believed to acquire and retain their special status because they were validated by the intentional and sensory performance of both inscription and utterance by a qualified scribe during a minutely prescribed process of production. This performance of crafting items *for their own sake* and with special mental focus was regarded as bestowing divine energy on material objects, a process that occurred under human control. Rather than being restricted to a particular class or cultural sphere, both amulet-writers and *STaM*-makers consistently reappropriated and recontextualized established scribal regulations in order to serve competing interests in an ongoing popular search for safety and success in a dangerous world. From reading amulet scribal instructions closely, we can attempt to understand how people construed the promise embedded in the crafting of these objects as singularly effective forms of personal protection—fashioned through the intertwined histories of legal tradition, material transformation, physical labor, and struggles for power that epitomized the premodern Jewish world.

⁵⁷ E.g., MS Liverpool, Merseyside County Museum, M12074, f. 71r; see also MS Strasbourg, 3972, fol. 29r; MS Kyiv, The Vernadsky National Library of Ukraine, Heb. 178, ff. 86r, 88v–89r; MS Copenhagen, Royal Danish Library, Cod. Sim. Hebr. 9, f. 92r.

⁵⁸ MS Kyiv, The Vernadsky National Library of Ukraine, Heb. 178, ff. 91v–92r; Benyamin Beynish of Krotoszyn, *Amtahat Binyamin* (Wilhelmsdorf, 1716), f. 34r; *Toledot Adam* (Zhovkhva, 1720), 99–100.