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Demons, Magic, and Judaism: Incantation Bowls as Symbols of Mystical Jewish Practice

Zachary Goldstein

One month before a Jewish extremist assassinated Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in early November 1995, Rabin was the subject of an ancient Aramaic curse, cast by a group of ultra-Orthodox Israelis unhappy with his engagement with the Palestinians.¹ This *pulsa dinura*, a “death curse,” exemplifies the powerful and intricate ways in which magic has been and remains a part of some portions of Jewish tradition.² Judaism’s relationship with magical practice spans its entire history, with the Torah itself explicitly banning sorcery in a number of locations.³ The later rabbinical texts and commentaries on the Torah describe acts tantamount to modern conceptions of magic. Instead of the illusion work described in the Torah, traditional Jewish magical practice proved a more practical art, designed to solve issues plaguing the Jewish communities of the day.⁴ In this form, the Hebrew Incantation Bowls, a group of ceramic pieces from the area of ancient Mesopotamia, represent the manner in which religious leaders and artisans addressed their communities’ practical and psychological concerns through religious, legal, and symbolic strategies employed at the time of the bowls’ production. Bowls like item B13186 in the Penn Museum’s Middle East Gallery represent the melding of tangible legal and religious traditions with more esoteric arts in the pursuit of purposeful solutions.

Despite the complicated relationship between biblical teaching and magical practice, there does exist a rich record of rabbinical use of magic throughout Jewish history. During Babylonian

times, rabbis' use of magic was a kind of class differentiator, exemplifying their higher importance or ability than the average Jew.⁵ In this way, magic helped rabbis solidify their positions as stewards of Judaism, asserting a more solid footing of leadership. These practices existed despite prohibitions against sorcery in the Torah; in Babylonian Jewish tradition, the rabbinical community considered their magic to be different from the sorcery of their gentile neighbors. The Jewish practitioners believed that their magical acts were more successful and powerful, and thus incomparable to those of local non-Jews.⁶ The separation that magic created between the rabbis and both the larger Jewish community and non-Jewish neighboring populations suggests that the Babylonian rabbis assigned to themselves significant levels of importance. This importance empowered them to engage in practices that were banned by the very text on which the practices were based. The power that magic ascribed to rabbis allowed them to create a cycle of clout and influence that solidified their status as a sort of Jewish intelligentsia, largely distinct from the average Jew.

However, the Babylonian Jewish interpretation of the Torah's prohibition on magical practice differed from other groups' understandings, including those Jews living in historical Palestine. Unlike their Babylonian counterparts, the Palestinian Jews of antiquity ascribed influence and power to their religious leaders based on their upholding of Jewish morals and teachings. This differed greatly from the Babylonian focus on magical practice as a basis for power.⁷ The complex nature of magic's position in Jewish society is further complicated by magic's relationship with the institution of religion itself. While historically, scholars may have considered magic as distinct from religion, contemporary intellectual agreement suggests that magic simply represents one facet of religious practice.⁸ This indicates that the very practices that Babylonian Jews employed and Palestinian Jews attempted to avoid are simply a portion of Judaism writ large, albeit a controversial

one. When coupled with the recognition that many Jewish magical practices shared characteristics with those employed by local non-Jews, magic's role and significance within the Jewish community becomes even more difficult to comprehend.⁹ Only through the analysis of smaller cross-sections of Jewish magical practice can we gain an understanding of the role that magic may have played in ancient Jewish societies.

Incantation bowls, such as item B13186, are ceramic bowls with inscriptions around the sides and an image drawn in the center. The bowls were used as a way to ward off demons; a specific demon or entity is often the subject of the image painted in the center. Today, these bowls act as a physical representation of the kinds of magic that Jews practiced in antiquity. In creating these bowls, artisans drew both from the magical canon established by rabbis, itself an amalgamation of references to the Torah, and from the rabbis' own inventions. Additionally, incantation bowls contain references to Jewish law, such as the *get*, or divorce law.¹⁰ In this way, the bowls represent the manner in which Jewish magic could blend the esoteric with more "typical" manifestations of Jewish tradition. Manekin Bamberger suggests that some of the bowls' creators may have been *soferim*, or Jewish scribes, further supporting the notion that the bowls themselves were the product of mixing various aspects of Jewish religious tradition.¹¹ These incantation bowls thus exemplify how magic was not a marginalized practice, but an art form interconnected to the traditional aspects of Judaism. This interpretation further allows for the inclusion of both Babylonian and Palestinian interpretations of magic. Though the bowls' provenance is Babylonia, considering the range of interpretations that may have informed their construction, one can draw larger conclusions about the role that magic played in the Judaism of antiquity.

As functional items, the incantation bowls played a key role in increasing their users' perceived protection against demons. Beyond the purported protection the bowls provided, they undoubtedly acted as strong psychological tools through which Babylonian Jews could conceptualize themselves as safe from a demonic threat.¹² Walker highlights that the bowls provide a lens through which one can consider how Jewish magic may have been tailored to individual patrons as a sort of "therapeutic art."¹³ Walker asserts that though these therapeutic effects were perhaps not the immediate intended purpose of the bowls' creation, the potential psychological benefits they have can allow for an understanding of Jewish magic beyond the immediate intentions of its practitioners or patients. That is, Jewish magic in this context can be understood not only as an amalgamation of traditional and more mysterious aspects of Jewish tradition, but also as a mechanism through which Babylonian Jews were able to improve their mental conceptions of wellbeing.

As the product of the Penn Museum's bountiful excavation at Nippur in the late 19th century, item B13186, the "Hebrew Bowl," presents a helpful example through which one can better understand the mystical, psychological, and religious role that incantation bowls may have played in Babylonian Jewish society.¹⁴ The bowl itself, despite being described as a "Hebrew Bowl," has inscriptions around the sides in Aramaic with the drawing of a bound demon in the center.¹⁵ Given Nippur's location as part of ancient Babylonia, this bowl likely resulted from a local family's desire to protect themselves against demonic attack. By providing the spells and references necessary for the bowl's creation, rabbis would have been able to assert their own power and a religious intelligence that would have given them status above their fellow Jews. With the force of this religious rooting behind it, bowl B13186 could have provided its owners with a sense of security and protection

against an existential demonic threat. Understanding the context of the bowl's creation and its uses offers important insight that cannot be ascertained from a passing glance in a museum case.

Incantation bowls offer a closer look into the role magic played within the Jewish culture of antiquity. Given their place at the meeting point of magic, religion, psychology, and art, the bowls highlight the intersectional relationship between religion and culture in the Jewish tradition.

Constructing this background enables objects such as item B13186 to tell stories beyond the bounds of their own physicality. The complex grounding in which incantation bowls find themselves can therefore provide curators with a means of integrating the artifacts into narratives of magic, religion, and craftsmanship in the ancient world, thus transforming a simple bowl into the heart of an exhibit.

Zachary Goldstein graduated in May 2019 with a Bachelor of Arts in International Relations.

Endnotes

¹ Jessica Ravitz, "Rabin's Assassination Changed Israel -- and My Life," CNN, accessed April 21, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2015/11/04/world/yitzhak-rabin-assassination-anniversary/index.html>.

² Nicholas Saidel, "The Jewish Death Curse In Israeli Politics," May 3, 2013, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/05/03/the-jewish-death-curse-in-israeli-politics>.

³ Yehuda Shurpin, "Do Jews Believe in Magic or Witchcraft? - If Yes, How and Why Does It Work?" accessed April 21, 2019, https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/3555157/jewish/Do-Jews-Believe-in-Magic-or-Witchcraft.htm.

⁴ Yuval Harari, "'Practical Kabbalah' and the Jewish Tradition of Magic," *Aries – Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism* 19, (2019): 38–82.

⁵ Kimberly Stratton, "Imagining Power: Magic, Miracle, and the Social Context of Rabbinic Self-Representation," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 73, no. 2 (June 2005): 362.

⁶ *Ibid*, 384.

⁷ *Ibid*, 378.

⁸ Joseph Angel, "The Use of the Hebrew Bible in Early Jewish Magic," *Religion Compass* 3, no. 5 (2009): 786.

⁹ *Ibid*.

¹⁰ Avigail Manekin Bamberger, "Jewish Legal Formulae in the Aramaic Incantation Bowls," *Aramaic Studies* 13 (2015): 70.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 80.

¹² Harriet Walker, "Possible Psychological Roles of the Aramaic Incantation Bowls: Therapeutic Functions of Belief in Demons and the Practice of Incantations," *Aramaic Studies* 13 (2015): 95–109.

¹³ *Ibid*, 96.

¹⁴ "Nippur (Iraq) - Highlights | Digital Collections - Penn Museum," accessed April 22, 2019, <https://www.penn.museum/collections/highlights/babylonian/location/nippur.php>.

¹⁵ "Hebrew Bowl - B13186 | Collections - Penn Museum," accessed April 22, 2019, <https://www.penn.museum/collections/object/297737>.