

***Baruch Atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech Ha'Olam,
Asher Kideshanu BeMitzvotav VeTzivanu,
La'asok BeDivrei Torah. Hafoch Bah!***

Text 1: Talmud Bavli, Masechet Berachot, 34b

MISHNAH. IF ONE MAKES A MISTAKE IN TEFILLAH IT IS A BAD SIGN FOR HIM, AND IF HE IS A READER OF THE CONGREGATION IT IS A BAD SIGN FOR THOSE WHO HAVE COMMISSIONED HIM, BECAUSE A PERSON'S AGENT IS EQUIVALENT TO HIMSELF. IT WAS RELATED OF RABBI CHANINA BEN DOSA THAT HE USED TO PRAY FOR THE SICK AND SAY, THIS ONE WILL DIE, THIS ONE WILL LIVE. THEY SAID TO HIM: HOW DO YOU KNOW? HE REPLIED: IF MY PRAYER COMES OUT FLUENTLY, I KNOW THAT HE IS ACCEPTED, BUT IF NOT, THEN I KNOW THAT HE IS REJECTED.

GEMARA...Our Rabbis taught: Once the son of Rabban Gamliel fell ill. He sent two scholars to Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa to ask him to pray for him. When he saw them he went up to an upper chamber and prayed for him. When he came down he said to them: Go, the fever has left him; They said to him: Are you a prophet? He replied: I am neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet, but I learnt this from experience. If my prayer is fluent in my mouth, I know that he is accepted: but if not, I know that he is rejected. They sat down and made a note of the exact moment. When they came to Rabban Gamliel, he said to them: By the temple service! You have not been a moment too soon or too late, but so it happened: at that very moment the fever left him and he asked for water to drink.

...On another occasion it happened that Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa went to study Torah with Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai. The son of Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai fell ill. He said to him: Chanina my son, pray for him that he may live. He put his head between his knees and prayed for him and he lived. Said Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai: If Ben Zakkai had stuck his head between his knees for the whole day, no notice would have been taken of him. Said his wife to him: Is Chanina greater than you are? He replied to her: No; but he is like a servant before the king, and I am like a nobleman before a king.

Text 4: Talmud Bavli, Masechet Ta'anit, 23a

One year the winter brought no rain to Jerusalem. Toward the end of Adar, that is, well after Purim, the people summoned Choni to intercede for them. When his prayers elicited no sign of divine grace, Choni drew a circle and stepped inside. "Lord of the Universe," he said, "Your children have placed their trust in me, because I am like a member of Your family. Believe me, I will not leave this circle till You show some compassion." It began to drizzle. Whereupon the people said to Choni, "Seeing you, we will surely not die. But it does appear to us that this drizzle is sent merely to comply nominally with your oath."

Choni turned to God: "This is not what I sought. I asked for a rain that would fill pits, ditches and caves." This time it rained furiously till each drop bore a barrel of water. Again the people protested: "Seeing you, we will surely not die. But it does appear to us as if this rain is sent only to destroy the world." Again Choni addressed God: "This is not what I sought. I asked for a rain of good will and blessing, freely given."

Finally, it rained normally and steadily, until the people were obliged to take refuge on the Temple mount. And now they asked Choni to bring the rain to an end. Despite some reservations, Choni acceded to their urging with the following insight offered in prayer over a thanksgiving bullock, and the reason I bring the story: "Lord of the Universe, Your people Israel, which You took out of Egypt, cannot endure too much of a good thing or too much punishment. If You are angry with them, they cannot make it, if You are too generous with them, they cannot make it. So may it be Your will to stop the rain and give the world a respite." Once the rain had ended, the people went into the fields to find them already sprouting with mushrooms.

Text 2: Talmud Bavli, Masechet Berachot, 7a

Rabbi Ishmael ben Elisha said: I once entered into the innermost part [of the Sanctuary] to offer incense and saw Akatriel Yah, the Lord of Hosts, seated upon a high and exalted throne. God said to me: "Ishmael, My son, bless Me!" I replied: "May it be Your will that Your mercy may suppress Your anger and Your mercy may prevail over Your other attributes, so that you may deal with Your children according to the attribute of mercy and may, on their behalf, and go beyond the limit of strict justice!" God nodded to me with God's head. From here we learn that the blessing of an ordinary person must not be considered lightly in your eyes.

Text 3: Talmud Bavli, Masechet Megillah, 7b

Rabbah and Rabbi Ze'ira made a Purim feast together. They got drunk. Rabbah stood up and killed Rabbi Ze'ira. On the morrow, Rabbah prayed for him and resurrected him. The following year, Rabbah said to him: 'Come, let us celebrate the Purim feast together!' Rabbi Zeira replied: 'Miracles don't happen every day!'

outline:

bracha

review “myth”, time, place, as blurring of boundaries and seeking something hidden, something redemptive both beyond and within

describe the question of mythic person, and the choice to focus on Talmudic personalities

adam kadmon / biblical characters / prophets

by focusing on Talmudic personalities, the question becomes sharper – who are the contemporary miracle workers for the community of rabbis, editors, people – not an ancient story, but one with resonant details.

Ginzberg text on the geese

Notes:

Wikipedia: Choni HaM'agel (המעגל חוני) **Kchoni, or Choni, HaM'agel, Hebrew for Choni the Circle-drawer** (First century BCE) was a Jewish scholar prior to the age of the **Tannaim**, the scholars from whose teachings the **Mishnah** (the first part of the **Talmud**) was derived. During the first century BCE, a variety of religious movements and splinter groups developed amongst the **Jews** in **Judea**. A number of individuals claimed to be miracle workers, in the tradition of **Elijah** and **Elisha** the ancient Jewish prophets. The **Talmud** provides some examples of such Jewish miracle workers. **Mishnah Ta'anit** 3:8 tells of *Choni HaM'agel* ("Choni the Circle-drawer") who was famous for his ability to successfully pray for **rain**. On one occasion when **God** did not send rain well into the **winter** (in the geographic regions of **Israel** it rains mainly in the winter), he drew a **circle** in the dust, stood inside it, and informed God that he would not move until it rained. When it began to drizzle, Choni told God that he was not satisfied and expected more rain; it then began to pour. He explained that he wanted a calm rain, at which point the rain calmed to a normal rain. He was almost put into **excommunication** for the above incident in which he showed "dishonor" to God. However, **Shimon Ben Shetach**, the brother of the queen **Salome Alexandra** excused him saying that he was Choni and had a special relationship with God. The circumstances of Choni's death are described in the Talmud (Ta'anit 23a): He fell asleep and awoke after 70 years, and when nobody would believe him that he was indeed Choni the Circledrawer, he prayed to God and God took him from this world. **Josephus**, in the *Antiquities of the Jews*, relates Choni's end in the context of conflict between the **Hasmonean** brothers **Hyrcanus II**, backed by the Pharisees and advised **Antipater the Idumaeen**, and **Aristobulus II**, backed by the Sadducees. Around 63 BCE, Choni was captured by the followers of Hyrcanus besieging Jerusalem and asked to pray for the demise of their opponents. Choni however prayed: "Lord of the universe, as the besieged and the besiegers both belong to Thy people, I beseech Thee not to answer the evil prayers of either." After this, the followers of Hyrcanus stoned him to death. The **Maharsha** (*Ta'anit* ad loc.) answers the discrepancy between the Talmud and Josephus by stating that Choni was "presumed" killed by **Hyrcanus II**'s men, but in reality was put into a deep sleep for 70 years. Choni's grave can be located near the town of **Hatzor Ha Gellilit** in northern **Israel**.

Exorcism by Rabbis: Talmud Sages and Their Magic

Meir Bar-Ilan

Until now little historical research has been done on Jewish magic in ancient times, for various reasons, some of them self-understood. The first book to deal with this problem, published almost a century ago, is almost the last.¹ The discovery in the Geniza of the *Sefer ha-Razim* (Book of Secrets), a magic book of a Palestinian Jew of the Talmudic period, a discovery that should have encouraged scholars to deal with this forgotten field, nevertheless did not advance the investigation of Jewish magic, but steps are now being taken in this direction.² Christian magic is unlike Jewish magic: the investigation of magic among the early Christians, that is, magic believed in by the (mostly) Jewish Palestinians, has received considerable attention.³

The prophets and leaders of Israel in the Biblical period already performed miracles, including some that appear like miracles in all respects.⁴ Indeed, focusing exclusively on exorcism, in line with the following discussion, brings out that in Jewish literature over the generations an exorcism incident (albeit outside Palestine) is described for the first time in the Book of Tobias.⁵ Hundreds of years later Josephus reports on a Jew named Elazar who performed exorcisms a number of times in the presence of Vespasian and the Roman military commanders (Jewish Antiquities 8, 2, 5, 45-48).⁶ Similarly, the Qumran library contains poems intended to drive out evil spirits, and presumably the residents used these prayers 'to frighten and scare all the spirits of the angels of destruction'.⁷ As is known, acts of exorcism were also told about Jesus (Matthew 12, 22-24; Mark 5, 2-20; 6, 13; Luke 8, 2; 8, 26-33) and his disciples (ibid, 7, 22; Acts of the Apostles, 19, 13). Scholars have shown that Jesus was a Jewish magician.⁸ Thus, exorcism was an accepted folk practice. In spite of the ancient Jewish factionalism recognized in various fields, unanimity regarding exorcism was recognized in various circles in the Jewish people in the first century of the Common Era (and apparently, in the periods before and after it).

Similarly in Hellenistic culture 'holy' men, among others, dealt with miracles, read: exorcism. The sages of Israel were bound to conclude from two great civilizations that these deeds - including exorcism, that is, curing people - were an accepted social and religious phenomenon.⁹

A. Deeds of the Sages

More than once we read in Talmudic literature that the sages of the Mishnah and Talmud dealt with magic.¹⁰ It can be generalized that in ancient times no distinction was made between religious life and magic - in accord with the thinking of modern ideas - but magic was an then integral part of religion.¹¹ Indeed, among the various matters of magic mentioned in the Talmudic literature, three incidents of exorcism by rabbis are noted explicitly,¹² though presumably many more incidents of this type occurred among Jews in ancient times.¹³ In any case, before our discussion of the stories of exorcism by sages, it must be mentioned that exorcism - in spite of its magic character for modern eyes - was in actually a therapeutic operation. The ancient world believed that sickness is caused by spirits that entered the body, hence removal of the spirits will effect his a cure.¹⁴ Thus, medicine and ancient folk wisdom recognized exorcism not necessarily as a magic operation but as a matter of therapy (similar to the war against microbes that invade the body of modern man).

....

Summary

Apparently, the discussion here focused, on male and female spirits and the ways of exorcising them from women and springs.⁵⁰ However, together with this, a penetrating look into the acts of the sages of the Mishna and Talmud in this field reveals more than a little about the type of leadership in ancient times: a leadership that included charismatic authoratative (knowledge of Halacha) Shamanistic (miraculous deeds) and political components. It is thus recognized that in ancient times there was no distinction between religion and magic (as understood by modern man) and key people in the history of Mishna and Talmud dealt with Torah as well as miraculous deeds.⁵¹ Even if there are those who wish to deny this, it is reasonable that the role of magic in the spiritual world of the Jews of Palestine was greater than accepted nowadays, either by the successors of those sages or by those who study their world.⁵²

ḤANINA B. DOSA,

from the Jewish Encyclopedia, Isidore Singer & S. Mendelsohn

Scholar and miracle-worker of the first century; pupil of Yochanan b. Zakkai (Ber. 34b). While he is reckoned among the Tannaim and is quoted in connection with a school and its disciples, no halakot and but few haggadot are preserved as from him (Baraita of R. Eliezer xxix., xxxi.; Midr. Mishle x. 2). His popularity, however, which he enjoyed throughout his life, and which rendered him immortal among the mystics, rests not on his scholarship, but on his saintliness and thaumaturgic powers. From the several maxims attributed to him it may be seen that he was a member of the Ḥasidim: "Whosoever's fear of sin precedes his learning, his learning will endure; but where learning precedes fear of sin, learning will not endure"; "Where a man's works are greater than his learning, his learning will stand; but where his learning is greater than his works, his learning will not stand"; "Whosoever earns the good-will of humanity is loved of God; but whoso is not beloved of man is not beloved of God" (Ab.iii. 9, 10; Ab. R. N. xxii. 1 [ed. Schechter, p. 35a]; for the corresponding Ḥasidean principles see Jew. Encyc. v. 225, s.v. Essenes). There are, also, other teachings which betray his Ḥasidic schooling. Ḥa-nina, like all the ancient Ḥasidim, prayed much, and by his prayers he is said to have effected many miracles.

....*The Miracle of the Golden Table-Leg.*

Notwithstanding his wonder-working powers, Ḥanina was very poor. Indeed, it became proverbial that, while the whole world was provided for through Ḥanina's great merits, he himself sustained life from one Sabbath eve to another on a basket of carob-beans. For some time the outside world had been kept in ignorance of his privations; his wife did all that was possible to maintain an appearance of comfort, and though she had no flour with which to make dough, she would put fuel into the oven every Friday and cause columns of smoke to rise, thus making her neighbors believe that, like them, she was baking the Sabbath meals. In time, however, one woman's suspicion was aroused, and she determined to surprise Ḥanina's wife and discover the truth. But a miracle prevented exposure. When the woman appeared at Ḥanina's house and looked into the smoking oven it was full of loaves. In spite of the miracle, Ḥanina's wife induced him to collect from heaven an advance portion of his future lot. Ḥanina complied with her request, and, in answer to his prayer, a golden table-leg was miraculously sent him. Husband and wife were happy; but that night the wife had a vision of heaven in which she saw the saints feasting at three-

legged tables while her husband's table had only two legs. She awoke full of regret at the importunity which had deprived his table of a leg, and insisted that he pray for the withdrawal of the treasure. This he did, and the golden leg disappeared. Of this miracle the Talmud says: "It was greater than the former, since heaven gives, but never takes" (Ta'an. 24b et seq.). By a miracle Hanina was once prevented from partaking of untithed food. One eve of Sabbath he sat down to his frugal meal, when suddenly the table receded from him. After thinking a while he recollected that he had borrowed some spices from a neighbor and that he had not separated the required tithe (see Haber). He thereupon adjusted the matter, and the table returned to him (Yer. Dem. i. 22a). It is stated that Hanina's donkey would not eat untithed food. Thieves had stolen the animal and confined it in their yard, furnishing it with the necessary provender; but the donkey would neither eat nor drink. As this continued for several days, the thieves concluded to free the animal, lest it starve to death and render their premises noisome. On its release it went straight home, none the worse for its long fast (Ab. R. N. viii. 8 [ed. Schechter, p. 19b]; comp. Yer. Dem. i. 21d; Shab. 112b). Once Hanina was greatly grieved at not being able, with other pious people, to present something to the Temple. In his despondency he walked out of town, and, seeing a huge rock, he vowed to carry it to Jerusalem as a gift to the Holy City. He smoothed and polished it, and then looked around for help to transport it. Five laborers appeared, and offered to carry the rock to its destined place for one hundred gold pieces. Hanina, who did not possess half that amount, turned away in despair. Soon, however, other laborers appeared and demanded only five "sela'im," but they stipulated that Hanina himself should aid in the transportation. The agreement concluded, they all seized the rock, and in an instant stood before Jerusalem. When Hanina turned to pay the laborers they were nowhere to be found. He repaired to the Sanhedrin to inquire what disposition he should make of the uncollected wages. The Sanhedrin heard his tale and concluded that the laborers were ministering angels, not human laborers, and that Hanina was therefore at liberty to apply the money to his own use. He, however, presented it to the Temple (Cant. R. i. 1; Eccl. R. i.).