

# Q: ARE THERE JEWISH WITCHES IN THE BIBLE?

**Rachel Havrelock on the sometimes sacrilegious seductresses of the sacred texts (only one of whom was turned into a donkey)**



**A:** Witch stories, often with a strange sexual appeal, abound in Jewish sacred texts such as the Torah and the Talmud. Judaism's relationship to witches has always been a complex affair — women's religious activity, conducted under the radar of the boys' club that is mainstream religion, has long been dismissed as magic. This is certainly the case in Judaism, but no systematic purges of magical activities have ever taken place. Rather, the rabbis who penned the Talmud (and thereby created modern Judaism) allowed these forbidden activities to be a part of the Jewish narrative as a way of prescribing proper behaviors and gender roles. It seems that magic has always helped Judaism figure out what, in fact, it is.

The story of witches is the story of an alternative Judaism. And because the witch story defined what made a bad woman and what made a good

one, it is also the story of Jewish women. In Judaism, the fates of witches and the fates of women have always been closely entwined.

**T**he Torah introduces the witch in an abrupt prohibition that flashes between the law against seducing a virgin and one condemning bestiality. It reads, mysteriously succinct: "Do not allow a witch to live" (Exodus 22:17). What a witch is remains hazy and undefined, but grammar makes clear that witches are female, and syntax that such women deserve death. The placement of the anti-witch law between sullied virgins and sex with animals suggests that the problem with the woman witch lies in the realm of the sexual. Of course, a rampant female sexuality is often associated with magic. Queen Jezebel's "whoredoms and witchcrafts" cling to her name even among those who have never read her story. The sexuality of the female magician appears as something too dangerous for biblical Judaism to sustain, and both the Prophet Nahum and the Prophet Ezekiel promise a day of reckoning for the sorcery of women. Magic as practiced by women is also associated with transgressions of a heretical nature. Exodus admonishes: "Whoever sacrifices to a god other than Yahweh alone will be cut off from his people" (Exodus 22:19).

What is this magic that deserves the punishment of death? An expanded definition in the book of Deuteronomy denounces "one who casts his son or daughter through the fire or practices divination, a soothsayer, an interpreter of signs, a sorcerer [male witch], or one who casts spells, speaks with ghosts or family spirits or seeks out the dead" (18:10). Not casting one's kids through the fire may sound like the most basic of parenting advice, but it probably aimed to discourage

ancient practices of child sacrifice. In any case, magic, in all its varieties, is here characterized as something inherently alien to Judaism.

It is also viewed as inherent to women. Later, in the Talmud, every woman is about a step away from being a witch: “Jewish women offer incense to witchcraft” (Berakhot 53a); “Jewish daughters are flagrantly involved in witchcraft” (Erubin 64b); and “the best of women is filled with witchcraft” (JT Kiddushin 4, 11). When the rabbis of the Talmud cause rain to fall or buildings to cave in, it is considered legitimate wonder-working sanctified by God; when women try their hand at changing the status quo, it becomes a subversive practice. Not even virtue can protect a woman from the lure of magic, since the tendency for witchery is built into her very soul.

**T**he story that melds women and sorcery forever in the Jewish imagination occurs in the book of Samuel. In the story of the Witch of Endor, King Saul goes looking for a witch. He faces an imminent Philistine attack on Israel and has been abandoned by relatives and allies. He confronts a ringing silence when he seeks God’s advice in dreams. Driven by desperation, Saul asks his servants to find him a diviner, a woman who can conjure ghosts and establish some communication with the supernatural realm.

In the Torah no biographical detail is incidental, and it was Saul himself who had earlier cleared the land of diviners and spirit mediums. The magic industry, of course, was not eliminated but rather went underground, and he eventually discovers the Witch of Endor, whom he visits in disguise under the veil of night. The Witch voices suspicion that he is an undercover agent working for the King, looking to entrap her. Saul swears to God (never a good thing to do in the Bible’s estimation) that no harm will befall her. But when the Witch of Endor beholds the risen spirit of the Prophet Samuel, she sees through Saul’s disguise and demands to know the motivation for his deception. The risen Prophet reprimands Saul for calling on the dead for advice and promises him defeat, death, and the genealogical loss of the throne. By the end, a petrified Saul lies catatonic on the floor.

It is the Witch of Endor who emerges as the

story’s most compassionate character. Her magic does not appear so black when she recognizes Saul’s terror and consoles him. She behaves like a good citizen, guiding the King from the ground to a bed and cooking a hearty meal for him and his servants. Her hospitality and nurture show the words of a living witch to be more comforting than those of a dead prophet. She cuts a figure of a witch as a life-giving force. At the same time, the fact that she is such an exemplary Jewish woman implies that spirit conjuring and magic may not be so uncommon among the Daughters of Israel.

**T**he labeling of magic, however, goes beyond exiling female religious acts; it also serves to construct the category of Judaism. In Deuteronomy, divination, soothsaying and fraternizing with spirits are marked as the practices of the goyim, “the Nations.” They are abominations in the eyes of God, reason enough to expel the Nations from the Land. In their place Israel is promised a prophet for each generation who will channel a message directly from God.

A famous story in the Midrash tells of a non-Jew who challenged Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai to explain how the ashes of a red heifer burned together with cedar and hyssop could counter impurity contracted by contact with a corpse. The rabbi explained that it worked the same way smoke inhalation and water sprinkling did for non-Jews looking to cure mental illness. Although readers have to wait until Freud for the Jewish cure for mental illness, the inquiring non-Jew is satisfied and goes on his way. Rabbi Yohanan’s students, not so easily swayed, ask him if he plans to also “knock them over with a reed.” To them, Rabbi Yohanan must admit that there is no rational explanation for the ritual; it is legitimate simply because God commanded it in the Torah. By extension, since God did not command a smoke-out and baptismal sprinkling, Jews should not undertake the non-Jewish ritual. As in Deuteronomy, magic is what *other* people do.

**T**he only hitch is that magic is also what Jewish women do. In Mishnah Avot, a collection of rabbinic sayings from the early Common Era, the great Rabbi Hillel advises, “the more possessions, the more worry.

The more women, the more witchcraft” (2:7). His point is that the more one chases after wealth and women, the more one’s troubles multiply. “The more women” has long been translated as “the more wives,” and understood to mean that in polygamous marriages the various wives will try to win the husband’s favor by cursing the others with sterility and bad cosmetics. I perceive an additional meaning — the more women have the opportunity to convene, the more likely they are to develop their own rituals and to carve out their own Judaism.

After all, in the Talmud, even women sitting together silently are suspect: “If two women sit at a crossroads, one on this side and the other on the other side, and they face one another — they are certainly engaged in witchcraft.” Fear of witchcraft justified keeping women separate from men and, in some cases, from one another. Any space that was inhabited by women would naturally become a haven for sorcery. This is the case with the eighty Witches of Ashkelon, who retreat from the world of men in a cave on the shores of the Mediterranean. In Judaism, the dark enclosures of caves are associated with all kinds of deviant sexuality. Lot’s daughters seduce their drunken father in one, Tamar seduces her father-in-law in a cavern, and the primordial demoness, Lilith, retreats to a cave on the shores of the Red Sea after she flees from the First Man and his insistence on the missionary position. The eighty Witches of Ashkelon are not subject to male control until a rabbi named Shimon ben Shetah is appointed the ruler, or patriarch, of the Jews in Palestine. Shimon, like King Saul, promises to rid the Holy Land of witches and launches a plan to make an example of the coven. While the problem with most witches is that they are oversexed, the fault with these is that they are undersexed. The rabbi wages a war of Eros, brandishing the weapon of male virility against his opponents.

The witching hour comes on a dark and rainy night when the rabbi appears at the cave to challenge its inhabitants to a magical duel. He invites them to display their powers first, and then boasts that by whistling he can conjure a man wrapped in a tallit for every witch. After two whistles, eighty men do appear in eighty tallits to seize the witches and lift them above the ground, in order to neu-

tralize their power. It is suggested, although not explicitly stated, that the eighty Jewish men employ other, more earthly, techniques than seizure to dewitchify the women — at which point they lose all power of resistance.

Never mind that Rabbi Shimon is a deceptive sorcerer (the raid isn’t magic at all; he stages the whole affair). The story encodes several strategies for dealing with recalcitrant women. To begin, despite her level of magical acumen, a rebellious woman — or eighty — can be tamed through the combination of a man and his religion. Sex is the primary cure for female magic, but a man sometimes needs the help of organized religion. Not only is religion something that doesn’t come naturally to women, but also it assists men in controlling their wives and daughters. The unexplored plot is the most compelling: What would have happened if the men had left the eighty witches on the ground and contended with their magic? Who would have won?

**T**he tangle of emotions and reactions that transpire between the sexes is associated, even by contemporary minds, with magic. How else to explain the attractions, the longings, the repulsions and suspicions that can overcome one simply by thinking about another? Magic’s rituals bridge gaps: the gap between the human and the supernatural realm, but also the gap between people. As no gap is quite so filled with mystery as that between the sexes, it comes as no surprise that, in the ancient world, a connection between them was considered an act of magic.

The witch stories sound a warning to women not to submit to certain impulses, and likewise instruct men on *their* proper sexual roles. On one occasion, a wealthy witch widow tries to seduce Rabbi Haninia bar Pappi. He casts a spell hoping to dispel the attraction and breaks out in sores and boils. She counters with an enchantment that heals him, thereby removing the impediment to intimacy, and the rabbi, fearing for his virtue, flees to a haunted bathhouse, where he spends the night. So strong is his fear of active female sexuality that he subjects himself to malevolent spirits rather than entertain the advances of one woman.

Men must be vigilant, as sexual intimacy, with its power to fuse two bodies into one and render the strong weak and the weak strong, can easily morph into a species of sorcery. The Talmud conveys this in the fantastical story of a man named Yannai who goes to stay at an inn and asks the proprietress to bring him some water. In this period, inns were associated with prostitution and any favor asked of a female employee was understood as a proposition. When the proprietress proffers a libation of flour and water, Yannai notices her lips moving. When she isn't looking, he spills a bit on the floor and watches it turn into a batch of snakes. He responds by challenging her: "Since I've had some of yours, now you have some of mine." Upon consuming some of Yannai's drink, the woman turns into a donkey, which Yannai rides into the marketplace until a female friend of the woman's appears and breaks the spell. Yannai is then seen by all riding a woman in public.

The story is part male fantasy and part cautionary tale about being discovered sleeping with a prostitute. Yannai's riding the woman/prostitute/donkey reveals his sexual appetite as well as his engagement in magical contests. That another woman breaks his spell and redeems her friend suggests that all women are in on the magic and that it is something they use against men. The tale points to the danger of using magic in order to bridge the gap between the sexes. Yannai and the proprietress employ magical means to draw closer until he finds himself on top of her in the market. Men's participation in women's magic upsets the societal order and leads to a sexual chaos likely to be visible to all.

These witch stories show that, at least by the rabbis who wrote them, the magic of the Daughters of Israel is seen as a kind of sophisticated prowess, amplified when they get together and reduced when they are paired off with men. (A young woman's witchcraft can be curbed through an early marriage, but the problem recurs if she is later widowed.) The stories also represent a complex technique for preventing female solidarity around the occasions of infertility, miscarriage, or birth. A Jewish woman is warned that as long as she remains in these tenuous states between life and death, she is subject to the curses and ill will

of her cohorts. When she wants to conceive, jealous women may cast the evil eye and cause sterility. When she is pregnant, witches may terminate gestation with their spells. And after the child is born, Lilith hovers close to the cradle hoping to snatch more children for her demonic brood. Women beyond the age of fertility pose a particular threat. One popular story that circulated in medieval times and likely earlier tells of Yohani Bat Retivi, a deceptive widow witch, who posed as a midwife while actually using magic to cause miscarriages. A young man eventually exposed her.

**A** kind of literary archaeology has allowed scholars to arrive at an estimation of actual female practices in ancient times. Most likely, young women had a tendency to gather and share sexual secrets, and this scared the rabbis. Most likely, women in their reproductive prime sought out the medicine of female healers, and this upset the rabbis. Most likely, some women dropped out of the marriage game and tried to form alternative communities — this was cause for a rabbinic counterattack — and, most likely, wealthy widows did initiate trysts with the rabbis, and such a possibility became rich fodder for Jewish fantasies. Women probably had their own prayers, rituals, and titillating tales of predatory sorcerers that hover in the nexus of what is said and what is left unsaid in Scripture. While there probably were some witches who brewed magic in their pots and used seduction as a way to wrest power, what the rabbis call a witch is more likely just a Jewish woman. 🧙

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