

INTRODUCTION

The story is told of a king who was about to sign an evil decree against the Jews. The people were terrified, but Rabbi Elimelech insisted they go ahead and celebrate the Sabbath as always. He said the Sabbath blessings. Then, before anyone began the meal, Rabbi Elimelech swept his arm across the table and knocked over a bowl of soup.

Later it was learned that at that very moment, just as the king was going to sign the decree, he accidentally knocked over the inkwell, spilling ink all over the parchment. The king took it as an omen. He tore up that evil decree and ordered that none like it should ever be drawn up again.

This tale recounts how a wise rabbi was able to save the Jewish community through magic. From a historical point of view, the story may well be a legend. But in the nineteenth century, people regarded it as a true account of a great sage who was famous for his magical powers.

The kind of magic Rabbi Elimelech uses in this story is known as sympathetic magic. Using it, a person can directly affect something that happens elsewhere, even at a great distance. This is only one of many kinds of magic found in this collection of tales.

Note that in the story, Rabbi Elimelech proceeds with the ritual of the Sabbath despite the danger. The Jewish people believe they are closest to God during the holy days—including the Sabbath—and it is essential, from the Jewish point of view, to maintain this close contact with the Divine. Indeed, during the most important of these holidays, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, a person's life is said to hang in the balance, as the decision is made in Heaven whether the person's name will be inscribed and sealed in the Book of Life.

Sometimes these tales of magic are linked with specific Jewish holidays. In this collection, one tale has been included for each of ten important holidays, as well as

for Rosh Hodesh and the Sabbath. The first story is linked to Rosh Hodesh, the first day of the month, and the last story is linked to the Sabbath, the last day of the week. Readers wanting to know more about these holidays will find information following the stories.

Holidays serve an important role in these stories. Every holiday is a time of heightened awareness and closeness to God, but as these stories attest, they could be times of great danger as well. Then rabbis take on the role of sorcerers and come to the rescue, as did Rabbi Elimelech in the tale of the bowl of soup.

Indeed, Rabbi Elimelech, who came from the city of Lizensk in Poland, was one of a long line of Jewish sorcerers going all the way back to Moses. When Moses held his staff over the Red Sea (also known as the Sea of Reeds), the waters of the sea parted (Exodus 14:21). So, too, when Moses struck a rock with his staff, water came forth (Numbers 20:11). It is not hard for us to look at that staff as a kind of magic wand, and the parting of the sea as a kind of magic. But in this case, of course, the source of the magic is God.

Perhaps the greatest Jewish sorcerer of all was King Solomon, who knew the languages of the birds and even of the winds. He had a magic ring with God's name on it, which gave him unlimited powers, and a magic carpet that took him wherever he wanted to go.

King Solomon served as the model for all Jewish sorcerers who came after him. Among them were Rabbi Adam, who once moved a palace hundreds of miles in the blink of an eye, and Rabbi Judah Loew, who created the Golem, the man made of clay, which he brought to life by pronouncing God's secret name.

Jewish tradition holds that there is a secret pronunciation of God's four-letter name, YHVH. It is said that there is only one great sage in every generation who knows how to truly pronounce this name, and whoever knows this secret has unlimited powers at their command. Indeed, Jews do not pronounce God's name when it appears in prayers, out of concern that someone might accidentally pronounce God's name in the right way, and who knows what would happen then? Instead, they say *Adonai* (God) or *Ha-Shem* (the Name).

But God is not the only name with magic powers. There also are secret names of angels that, when pronounced, are the keys to magical feats. Indeed, angels are often found in these magical stories. Four angels give Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa a ride to Jerusalem, along with a beautiful stone he brings as a gift to the Temple. And Rabbi Hayim Pinto calls upon Rahab, the Angel of the Sea, to recover a treasure lost in a shipwreck.

So, too, are there remarkable tales about heavenly journeys, where rabbis ascend on high to study the secrets of Jewish mysticism. And there are mysterious figures who appear and serve as guides in times of great danger, such as the old man in “The Cottage of Candles” who watches over everyone’s soul candle until it goes out and the soul takes leave of this world.

Another mysterious figure appears in “The Enchanted Menorah.” Here the Baal Shem Tov dreams about Mattathias, the father of the Maccabees, who lived two thousand years ago, only to awake and find Mattathias waiting to guide him home in a blizzard. Dreams, in fact, are among the primary ways that God communicates with people in these stories. In “The Angel of Dreams,” Rabbi Or Shraga asks a dream question before he goes to sleep. When the Angel of Dreams can’t reach the rabbi, his wife receives the dream instead.

Still another kind of magic is used by Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav in “The Souls of Trees.” After waking from a nightmare, he uses the mystical technique of opening a holy book at random and pointing to a passage, which serves not only to interpret his dream, but also to explain why the innkeeper and his wife have remained barren.

Yet even though these rabbis function as sorcerers, they know well that the complete source of their power comes from God, and from their unshakable faith in God. And even though they have great powers, their aim is not to accomplish supernatural effects for their own benefit, but only to promote the well-being of the Jewish people. Indeed, from this perspective, what occurs in these stories is not so much magic as miracles of God. This is the essence of Jewish magic, for ultimately the Jewish people depend on God and not on magic to guard and protect them.