

PAYYETANIM AS HEROES OF MEDIEVAL
FOLK NARRATIVE:
THE CASE OF R. SHIM'ON B. YIṢḤAQ OF MAINZ

Lucia Raspe*
Frankfurt a.M.

A central issue in the study of medieval Jewish legends about medieval Jewish characters is that of the relationship these stories bear to the historical person they claim for their hero. To a certain extent, the problem results from the very nature of the material. The texts we have are generally of a much later date than the time the narratives may have originated in orally, let alone the events they purport to relate. If the person in question lived in the thirteenth, the twelfth, or even the eleventh century, the vicissitudes of manuscript transmission as well as the relatively late emergence of original narrative prose in medieval Ashkenaz make it likely that the written sources which the historian of folk narrative, paradoxically enough, must rely on will date from the fourteenth, the fifteenth, or even the sixteenth century. How then can we determine the age of the tradition we are studying? Very often, it seems, the assumption will be that although our written sources are late, the traditions they record must be older. If they do not contain, as early scholarship tended to assume, a kernel of historical fact, they certainly preserve echoes of reality. At the very least, such legends are taken to constitute testimony to the impression their hero's outstanding personality must have made on his contemporaries.¹ For why should

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¹ For the assumption that the narrative traditions that have come down to us emerged close to their heroes' lifetime, see e.g. Sara Zfatman, לתולדות: בין אשכנז לספרד: ליהודי בימי הביניים (Jerusalem 1993), pp. 74f., 105; on the impression that Shim'on b. Yiṣḥaq in particular must have left, Avraham Grossman, חכמי אשכנז

posterity have made up stories about a rabbi long since deceased? Why indeed?

The present paper will suggest one possible answer. Let us take a “classic” of medieval Jewish lore as our point of departure—the story of the “Jewish Pope”, which made its first appearance in print in the Basle edition of the Yiddish *Mayse Bukh* in 1602.² This is the story of R. Shim‘on b. Yiṣḥaq *hagadol*, one of the great liturgical poets of early Ashkenaz who lived in Mainz in the tenth and at the beginning of the eleventh century,³ and of his son Elḥanan, who is abducted from his parental home as a young child and brought up as a Christian. A boy of great intellectual talent, Elḥanan enters the clergy and quickly rises in its hierarchy until finally he is elected pope. Aware of his Jewish origins and increasingly dissatisfied with the Christian faith, the young pope contrives to meet with his father in Rome by decreeing a decree (גזירה) against the Jewish community in Mainz, forbidding them to keep the Sabbath, to circumcise their sons and to observe the laws of *nidda*—knowing very well that none but his father will be sent to Rome to plead their cause. His ruse succeeds, R. Shim‘on duly arrives, and in the course of an emotional scene of recognition, Elḥanan decides to repent. After revoking the decrees and depositing an anti-Christian tract for his successors to read, the Jewish Pope secretly leaves Rome and returns to Mainz where he rejoins the community as a pious Jew. And lest we think this is fiction, the narrative concludes, proof of the story’s

הראשונים: קורותיהם, דרכם בהנהגת הציבור, יצירתם הרוחנית (Jerusalem 1981), pp. 86f., 94f.

² *Mayse* no. 187, fols. 125b–127b. A 19th-century Hebrew translation of the Yiddish text was published in Aharon Jellinek (ed.), *בית המדרש* (Leipzig, Wien 1853–1877), vol. 5, pp. 148–152; an English translation of Jellinek’s version can be found in Micha Joseph bin Gorion, *Mimekor Yisrael: Classical Jewish Folktales*, trans. I. M. Lask (Bloomington, London 1976), vol. 1, no. 211, pp. 408–413. For an English translation of the Yiddish original, albeit—like the Hebrew in *בית המדרש*—based on an 18th-century *Mayse Bukh* edition, see Moses Gaster (trans.), *Ma’aseh Book: Book of Jewish Tales and Legends* (Philadelphia 1934), vol. 2, no. 188, pp. 410–418. For fuller treatments including discussion of the “Sephardic” versions of the tale which are outside the scope of this paper, see Abraham David, “בירורים בעניינה של אגדת האפיפיור היהודי,” in *יד להימן*, ed. Zvi Malachi (Lod 1983), pp. 17–25; David Levine Lerner, “The Enduring Legend of the Jewish Pope,” *Judaism* 40 (1991): 148–170.

³ On Shim‘on b. Yiṣḥaq, see Ismar Elbogen, *Der jüdische Gottesdienst in seiner geschichtlichen Entwicklung*, 3rd ed. (Frankfurt am Main 1931), pp. 328ff.; Grossman, *חכמי אשכנז* (above, n. 1), pp. 86–102. His collected *piyyutim* can be found in Avraham Meir Habermann (ed.), *פיוטי רבי שמעון ב”ר יצחק* (Berlin, Jerusalem 1938). For a recent study of his work, see Elisabeth Hollender, *Synagogale Hymnen: Qedushta’ot des Simon b. Isaak im Amsterdam Mahsor* (Frankfurt am Main 1994).

while this may have provided a perfect opportunity for R. Shim'on to have proved himself the kind of *shtadlan* that he was remembered as, it also may have been the occasion for his son to have left the Jewish fold, as a son of Rabbenu Gershom *me'or hagola* is known to have done at about the same time.⁹ After all, we are reminded, R. Shim'on b. Yish'aq did have a son called Elhanan. How do we know? In fact, we know for the very same reason that medieval storytellers did: because he is mentioned in the *piyyut*.

I suspect that not a few of the historical legends of medieval Ashkenaz that have come down to us owe their existence to the adoption, during the era of classical *piyyut*, of the custom for liturgical poets to “sign” their work by means of Hebrew acrostics.¹⁰ This practice, in turn, gave medieval commentators on the liturgy valuable clues in establishing their own kind of literary history; at the same time, the acrostics set their minds thinking about the specific circumstances that had led to the poem's creation. Moreover, not only did some *payyetanim* sign their own names, increasingly accompanied by various benedictory formulae, but, in a number of particularly intriguing cases, they also added names and blessings for other persons.¹¹ These certainly required explanation on the part of the commentators, and quite naturally, it seems, explanation took on narrative form. Whether such narratives were actually inspired by the *piyyut* they were supposedly commenting on, or whether the etiology was added as an afterthought, as it were, to a pre-existent story,¹² the inclusion of such tales in the *perushim* certainly helped ensure their survival.¹³

zigsten Geburtstage Martin Philipppsons [Leipzig 1916], pp. 1–5), while Friedrich Lotter, “Die Vertreibung der Juden aus Mainz um 1012 und der antijüdische Traktat des Hofgeistlichen Heinrich,” in *Judenvertreibungen in Mittelalter und früher Neuzeit*, eds. Friedhelm Burgard, Alfred Haverkamp and Gerd Mentgen (Hannover 1999), pp. 37–74, here p. 39 n. 8, fails to recognize its possible relevance.

⁹ Thus e.g. Habermann's introduction to his edition of R. Shim'on's *piyyuṭim* (above, n. 3), p. 12; Grossman, *הכמ"ר אשכנז* (above, n. 1), pp. 90, 106.

¹⁰ Leopold Zunz, *Die Synagogale Poesie des Mittelalters*, 2nd ed. (Frankfurt am Main 1920), pp. 106ff.; Ezra Fleischer, *שירת־הקודש העברית בימי־הביניים* (Jerusalem 1975), pp. 128f.

¹¹ Zunz, *Synagogale Poesie*, pp. 108ff.; Fleischer, *שירת־הקודש*, p. 129. For examples of the confusion this practice created in the commentaries, see Ezra Fleischer, “Prayer and *Piyyut* in the Worms *Maḥzor*,” in *Worms Maḥzor. MS Jewish National and University Library Heb. 4° 781/1*, introductory vol., ed. Malachi Beit-Arié (Jerusalem 1985), pp. 36–78, esp. pp. 55ff.; Ephraim E. Urbach (ed.), *ספר ערוגת הבשם לר' אברהם* (Jerusalem 1939–1963), vol. 4, pp. 45f.

¹² On the varying degrees of the serious as opposed to the the playful in etiological tales, see Lutz Röhrich, *Märchen und Wirklichkeit*, 2nd rev. ed. (Wiesbaden 1964), pp. 33–36.

In the case of “Elhanan the Jewish Pope”, the paths of transmission are fairly clear. Of the four Hebrew versions of the tale preceding the *Mayse Bukh* that have reached us in manuscript, three, written between the early fourteenth and the early sixteenth century, occur within commentaries on the liturgy of Rosh Hashanah.¹⁴ The fourth, apparently a self-contained unit among diverse materials collected in a fifteenth-century manuscript, must have been excerpted from a similar commentary.¹⁵ Thus, the “Jewish Pope” narrative may be considered a good example of the process of emancipation, so to speak, of Ashkenazic narrative prose by which historical legends about medieval characters were first isolated from their original, religiously determined context and then themselves collected into groupings of *ma'asim* or *mayses*—a process attested in Hebrew since the fifteenth century which reached its peak in the ever larger Yiddish collections of the sixteenth, culminating, of course, in the printed *Mayse Bukh* itself.¹⁶

¹³ On *piyyut* commentary in general, see Urbach's introduction to his edition of *ערוגת הבשם* (above, n. 11), vol. 4, pp. 3–111; Avraham Grossman, “הרקע לצמיחת ספר יובל לשלמה סימונסון: קובץ מחקרים”, in *פרשנות הפיוט בגרמניה ובצרפת במאה ה־א* (Tel Aviv 1993), pp. 55–72; and the recent monograph by Elisabeth Hollender, “Mittelalterliche hebräische Kompilationsliteratur am Beispiel aschkenasischer und französischer Pijjut-kommentare” (Habilitationsschrift, Universität Duisburg, 2000). On the role of historical legends within that genre, see Gerson D. Cohen, “The Hebrew Crusade Chronicles and the Ashkenazic Tradition,” in *Minhah le-Nahum. Biblical and Other Studies Presented to Nahum M. Sarna in Honour of His 70th Birthday*, eds. Marc Brettler and Michael Fishbane (Sheffield 1993), pp. 36–53, esp. pp. 51f.

¹⁴ These are (1) MS London David Sofer 5 (Institute of Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts [IMHM] 72147), dated 1301, fol. 119^v, a manuscript once in the possession of Samuel David Luzzatto and described in Arthur Zacharias Schwarz, *Die hebräischen Handschriften in Österreich (außerhalb der Nationalbibliothek in Wien)*, vol. 1 (Leipzig 1931), no. 201, pp. 146–151. For its version of the Elhanan narrative, see Zalman Hayyim Halberstam, “מעשה של ר' שמעון הגדול,” *Jeschurun* 6 (1868): 121–124, here p. 122 n. 1 (= *Ginze Nistarot* 3 [1872]: 1–4, here p. 2 n. 1); (2) MS Parma Palatina 3507 (Perreau 27, Stern 1; IMHM 14015), dated 1386, fols. 131^v–132^v. This version of the tale is very close to that of MS Cambridge (see below). Cf. Halberstam, “מעשה”, p. 121 n. 1; (3) MS Oxford Bodleiana Opp. 675/1570c (Neubauer 1210; IMHM 16670), early 16th c., fol. 47^v. The text was printed in Adolf Neubauer, *Catalogue of Hebrew Manuscripts in the Bodleian Library* (Oxford 1886), col. 427.

¹⁵ MS Cambridge University Add. 858.1 (IMHM 17013), 15th c., fols. 46^f–47^r; cf. Stefan C. Reif, *Hebrew Manuscripts at Cambridge University Library* (Cambridge 1997), no. 859, pp. 472f. This version was published by Halberstam, “מעשה” (above, n. 14); it was reprinted (with slight emendations) by Jellinek, *בית המדרש* (above, n. 2), vol. 6, pp. 137ff., and many times since. An English translation of Jellinek's text is in Bin Gorion, *Mimekor Yisrael* (above, n. 2), vol. 1, no. 212, pp. 414ff.

¹⁶ On aspects of this process in Yiddish literature, see Sara Zfatman-Biller, “(1814–1504) הסיפורת בידיש מראשיתה עד שבחי הבעש״ט” (Ph.D. diss., Jerusalem 1983),

As for its materials, the story is by no means all new: in fact it is part of a rich polemical tradition which has recently been studied under the apt heading of “the converso as subversive”.¹⁷ This pattern of a Jew who accepts Christianity and rises to a position of authority inside the Church only to use that authority to ensure the well-being of his former coreligionists was firmly in place by the eleventh century at the latest. Thus, in some versions of the *Toldot Yeshu*, the Jewish counter-history to the Gospels, the apostle Peter, a pious Jew at heart, is pictured as locking himself up in Rome and sending out *piyyuṭim* to the Jewish world.¹⁸ Similarly, several manuscripts originating in pre-expulsion Spain preserve a tradition about an apostate Jew who, having risen to the rank of bishop, saves the Jews of his city from persecution; when the community elders come to thank him, he presents them with a *seliḥa* he has written, asking them to incorporate it into their prayer-book, which they do. It is more than likely that this last tale came into being because the first letters in the stanzas of the *piyyuṭ* in question, אנדרשי or אנדישר, were read acrostically and interpreted as the rather unexpected name of Andreas.¹⁹ In short, medieval Jews certainly did

vol. 1, pp. 121ff.; Erika Timm, “Zur Frühgeschichte der jiddischen Erzählprosa: Eine neu aufgefundene Maïse-Handschrift,” *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur* 117 (1995): 243–280, esp. pp. 244f. For a discussion of the role of Ashkenazic historical legends in the emancipation of Hebrew narrative prose, see Joseph Dan, “לתולדותיה של ‘ספרות השבחים,’” *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Folklore* 1 (1981): 82–101, esp. pp. 96–100.

¹⁷ Ram Ben-Shalom, “The Converso as Subversive: Jewish Traditions, or Christian Libel?” *JJS* 50 (1999): 259–283, esp. pp. 275–279.

¹⁸ Samuel Krauss, *Das Leben Jesu nach jüdischen Quellen* (Berlin 1902), esp. pp. 226–230; Simon Légasse, “La légende juive des Apôtres et les rapports judéo-chrétiens dans le haut Moyen Age,” *Bulletin de littérature ecclésiastique* 75 (1974): 99–132. Recently, in a paper entitled “Why did the Apostle St. Peter Write Piyyuṭim?” presented at the Thirteenth World Congress of Jewish Studies, Jerusalem 2001, Wout van Bekkum suggested that these versions of the St Peter legend may themselves have been influenced by tales about Shim’on b. Yiṣḥaq and/or the “Jewish Pope” tradition. While it is true that the relevant *Toldot Yeshu* manuscripts are relatively late, the traditions ascribing the liturgical poems *אתן תהלה* and *נשמת כל חי* to Shim’on Kefa’ were known to Rashi and Rabbenu Tam, respectively. See Simon Hurwitz (ed.), *מחזור ויטרי לרבינו שמחה* (Nürnberg 1923), vol. 1, no. 66, p. 282; no. 325, p. 362. That the two legends were perceived as closely related is evidenced in MS Amsterdam Rosenthaliana 467, an early nineteenth-century version of *Toldot Yeshu* which introduces the story of the Jewish Pope into the St Peter legend itself. See Günter Schlichting, *Ein jüdisches Leben Jesu. Die verschollene Toledot-Jeschu-Fassung Tam u-mu’ad* (Tübingen 1982), pp. 10ff. For a discussion of the two narratives, see also Eli Yassif, *סיפור העם העברי: תולדותיו, סוגיו ומשמעותו* (Jerusalem 1994), pp. 333–336 and 647ff. n. 59.

¹⁹ See Leopold Zunz, *Literaturgeschichte der synagogalen Poesie* (Berlin 1865), p. 6. For the *piyyuṭ* אלהי ישועתנו, see Davidson, *אוצר* (above, n. 4), א 4453. The tale was

not have to be aware of an actual “Jewish Pope” in order to tell a story of the kind told about Elhanan.

So much for history. Now what about folklore? Recent research has diagnosed the narrative as belonging to tale type Aarne-Thompson 671, “The Three Languages” or “The Boy Pope”.²⁰ This tale relates how a boy, being hopeless at study or, rather, having wasted his time learning the apparently useless animal languages, is driven from home by his angry father only to rise to greatness abroad, ending up on a royal throne or, indeed, the Holy See. Now Elhanan, of course, is not exactly thrown out by his father; much less does the latter try to do away with him as the boy’s father does in several of the versions of AaTh 671. Conversely, while most versions of the international tale type end in a final scene of recognition when the boy’s parents are put to shame or even killed, this last bit is conspicuously missing from the story of the “Jewish Pope”. On the contrary, the Jewish narrative seems to build up the role of the boy’s father at the expense of that of his son.²¹ Thus, the opening lines of the *Mayse Bukh* text introduce R. Shim’on *hagadol* as the owner of three clairvoyant mirrors and mention that after his death, there was a spring near his grave. These motifs, both associated with magic and mystical knowledge, are supposedly indicative of the extent to which the supernatural wisdom characteristic of the boy in AaTh 671

first printed by Eliezer Ashkenazi, טעם זקנים (Frankfurt am Main 1854), p. XI, from a handwritten note in the margins of a printed *seliḥot* edition quoting a manuscript of Joseph b. Šaddiq’s זכר צדיק written in Cordoba, i.e., during the final third of the 15th century. A slightly different version is recorded in the margins of the same work in MS London British Library Or. 11594 (IMHM 8351), late 15th c., fol. 257^r. An awareness of the tale is evident in the attribution of the same *seliḥa* to אנדראשי in MS Parma Palatina 1935 (de Rossi 1192; IMHM 13090), a *maḥzor* from Spain dated 1481, fol. 29^r. For additional narratives about converts typically named Andreas, see Alexander Scheiber, “Some Notes on the Conversion of Archbishop Andreas to Judaism,” *JJS* 15 (1964): 159f.

²⁰ Antti Aarne, *The Types of the Folktale*, trans. and enlarged by Stith Thompson, 2nd rev. ed. (Helsinki 1961), pp. 234f. For the argument that is paraphrased in the following, see Avidov Lipsker, “האספקלריא שלא האירה לר’ שמעון הגדול ממגנצא: לפשרה” (באזול, 1602), *Chulyot* 3 (1996): 33–57, esp. pp. 36ff.; Joseph Bamberger, “עיון תימטולוגי באגדה” (M.A. thesis, Bar-Ilan University, 1997), pp. 25–41. On AaTh 671 and the related AaTh 517, see Hans-Jörg Uther (ed.), *Brüder Grimm. Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (München 1996), vol. 3, pp. 71f. (on Grimm KHM 33) and the references cited there. A more closely related Jewish version is discussed in Eli Yassif, “לאופיו: ספר המעשים: לאופיו,” *Tarbiz* 53 (1983/84): 409–429, esp. pp. 420f.

²¹ Lipsker, “אספקלריא,” pp. 38ff.

was transferred to his father in the Jewish version of the tale. However, this raises a question. If R. Shim'on had second sight, how come he was unable to find his son after the boy was stolen from his house?—the very thing a magic mirror should be expected to do for its owner. The answer, according to this line of argument, is that this is the *Mayse Bukh* version's way of implicitly criticizing the boy's father after all. Magic, that is the message, is not the way. Traditional scholarship is; this is what is exemplified in the boy's capacity for learning and symbolized in his extraordinary ability at the game of chess.²² Thus, the story of the "Jewish Pope" is deemed to make a conscious move away not only from the non-Jewish versions of tale type 671, but also from other medieval tales in the *Mayse Bukh*, such as the well-known hagiographical cycle of narratives about Yehuda *hehasid* and his father Shmu'el, which heavily rely on magic.²³

I wonder. Let us take a closer look at the introduction of our story in the 1602 *Mayse Bukh* edition:

The following happened in the days of Rabbi Shim'on the Great who lived in Mainz as everybody knows. And people still know his house with the three large mirrors he used to have, in which he saw everything that had happened and everything that was going to happen. He also has a spring flowing forth from the head [of his grave] at the cemetery in Mainz. He was a great man. He had a son called Elhanan, who was still a little boy. Now it happened that one day ...²⁴

The key to this passage, I believe, lies in its use of the present tense when referring to the localization of R. Shim'on's house and to the spring at his grave. This places the narrative to follow in a context of oral tradition that seems to have been very much alive at the time it was committed to writing. When later *Mayse Bukh* editions moved away from the Ashkenazic legends' original locus, passages such as this, so obviously anchored in the living traditions of the Mainz community, were modified to address a less specific audience; only then did the present tense give way to a generalizing, perhaps nostalgic past.²⁵

²² Ibid., pp. 41ff.; cf. Bamberger, "אפיפּיור" (above, n. 20), pp. 81ff.

²³ Bamberger, "אפיפּיור," p. 115. On the narratives about the two leading figures in *hasidut ashkenaz*, see Sara Zfatman, "קווים לדמותו של ג'אנר בספרות יידיש," *Hasifrut* 28 (1979): 126–152.

²⁴ *Mayse Bukh* (Basle 1602), fol. 125b: מעשה אישט גישעהן אין טאגן רבי שמעון הגדול: צייטן דער אישט גיזעשון צו מענץ דאש גון אידר מאן וואל ווייש אונ' מן ווייש נאך וואל זיין הויז מיט דען דרייא גרושן שפיגיל הוט ער גיהט דא האט ער אלש דרינגן זעהן ווייש גישעהן אישט אונ' ווייש גשעהן זאל אונ' אך האט ער איין קוואל ברונגן צו זיין קאפא ארושר גין צו מענץ אויף דען בית חיים דער אישט גון איין אדום [!] גדול גיוועזן דער האט איין זון גיהט דער היש אלחונגן דער וואר נאך גאר איין קליינר יונג. גון עש ביגאב זיך איין מאל

Read this way, the opening of the original version does not appear to be an “exposition” or even part of the story at all. It is an editorial comment of the kind characteristic of the *Mayse Bukh* printed at Basle,²⁶ which introduces us to R. Shim‘on b. Yiṣḥaq by alluding—in a kind of shorthand—to a number of other tales that were being told about him, giving us mere narrative kernels without filling in the stories themselves. Although we shall never know what it was that R. Shim‘on used to see in his magic mirrors, the implied audience apparently knew well enough.²⁷ The question of why his mirrors failed R. Shim‘on in the search for his son never occurred to our narrator at all; they were part of an altogether different story. The introduction, then, tells us two things. First of all, the hero of the legend of the “Jewish Pope”, as it appears in the *Mayse Bukh*, is Shim‘on b. Yiṣḥaq, not his son.²⁸ There is

²⁵ The various *Mayse Bukh* editions are described in Jakob Meitlis, *Das Ma’assebuch: Seine Entstehung und Quellengeschichte* (Berlin 1933), pp. 31–45; Sara Zfatman, *הסיפורת בידיש מראשיתה עד ‘שבחי הבעש״ט* (1814–1504): ביבליוגראפיה מוערת (Jerusalem 1985), s. v. The textual tradition of the later printings has not been studied to date except for linguistic aspects. See, most recently, Shouu-Huey Chang, *Der Rückgang des synthetischen Präteritums im Jiddischen kontrastiv zum Deutschen* (Hamburg 2001), pp. 154–160. The influential English translation by Gaster (above, n. 2), as well as that by Lask (above, n. 2), are based on 18th-century editions, while the Hebrew translation used by both Lipsker, “אספקלריא” (above, n. 20), p. 54 (but cf. p. 39), and Bamberger, “אפיפּיור” (above, n. 20), p. 68, although based on the 1602 edition, fails to convey the present tense of the original. For a discussion of a similar move away from local tradition in another *Mayse Bukh* tale as it went through subsequent editions, see Lucia Raspe, “Emmeram von Regensburg, Amram von Mainz: Ein christlicher Heiliger in der jüdischen Überlieferung,” in *Neuer Anbruch: Zur deutsch-jüdischen Geschichte und Kultur*, eds. Michael Brocke, Aubrey Pomerance and Andrea Schatz (Berlin 2001), pp. 221–241, esp. p. 226.

²⁶ Cf. Zfatman, “מעשה בוך” (above, n. 23), p. 129; Chang, *Rückgang*, p. 83. Similarly, the narrator’s closing remark, according to which “some say” (איין טייל זאגן) that R. Shim‘on recognized his son by a move on the chess board he had taught him as a child, can hardly be considered the moral epilogue that Lipsker, “אספקלריא” (above, n. 20), p. 43, and Bamberger, “אפיפּיור” (above, n. 20), p. 83, take it to be; it simply takes note of a divergent oral variant before ending the story in a typically *Mayse Bukh* fashion: הקב״ה זול אונש אונגרי עבירות פאר געבן דורך רבי שמעון הגדולש זכות אמן סלה.

²⁷ For a fairly common tale type involving a rabbi, a king and a magic mirror, see e. g. Gedalyah Nigal, “שבחי ר’ חיים בן עטר,” in *קובץ מחקרים על יהדות המגרב*, ed. Moscheh Amar (Jerusalem 1982), pp. 73–93, esp. pp. 75ff. While in this tale the mirror functions as a means of overcoming the inhibitions of space, enabling its owner to see what is happening anywhere in the world at a given time, the phrasing in *Mayse Bukh* suggests that the tale involving R. Shim‘on’s mirrors was focused on the art of defeating time itself. See, in general, Ludwig Bieler, “Spiegel,” *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens* 9 (1941): 547–577, esp. cols. 555f. as opposed to 557ff.

²⁸ Note that the full-length Hebrew version of the tale is headed מעשה ברבינו שמעון הגדול in both MS Parma 3507 and MS Cambridge Add. 858.1. Like the Yiddish of the

little need to pronounce Elḥanan the story's hero only to wonder why the boy appears so much less central than he should if he really were. Secondly, as a tale about R. Shim'on b. Yiṣḥaq, our narrative is not unique. The editor's comment testifies to the existence of what may perhaps be called an implicit cycle of narrative materials focused on his person and firmly grounded in the topography of Jewish Mainz. These narratives, to be sure, never seem to have been collected the way the *shevaḥim* about Yehuda *heḥasid* and Shmu'el *heḥasid* were, but they must have been quite similar in character. And, in fact, a number of narrative traditions about R. Shim'on *hagadol* have been preserved elsewhere, some of which show an awareness of each other similar to that evident in the *Mayse Bukh* introduction to the tale of the "Jewish Pope".

I have been able to identify three additional full-fledged narratives about R. Shim'on *hagadol*: two in manuscript, one in print. Two of these three establish a connection between him and the persecution of Rhenish Jewry in 1096, גזירות תתנ"ו.²⁹ One—first documented in a Hebrew manuscript of the fifteenth century³⁰—is about a widow in Mainz who, feeling that the community is demanding of her more than her fair share of taxes just because she happens to be rich, regularly goes to the synagogue in order to weep in front of the Torah shrine, carefully collecting her tears in a silver cup. One day, her cup overflowing, she pours its contents into the *aron haqodesh*. Immediately, a voice is heard from between the Torah scrolls, telling her to be silent,

Mayse Bukh, it opens with an introduction alluding to additional narratives: מעשה ברבינו שמעון הגדול שבא מבית דוד ובה בעיר אחת ששמה מגענצא ונשא שם אשה מגדולי המלכות. Again, it is by no means difficult to fill in the foundation legend that is given here in the briefest way possible. For the two sides in the argument over the historical value of such materials, see Grossman, *הכמי אשכנז* (above, n. 1), p. 89, pp. 115f. n. 41, and Zfatman, *בין אשכנז לספרד* (above, n. 1), pp. 143f. and n. 174. Incidentally, while Grossman believes R. Shim'on may actually have married into the Kalonymos family, a comparable tale ascribes a similar marriage to the first Kalonymide settler of Mainz himself. See Abraham David, "סיפורי מעשיות על הגזירות בגרמניה בימי הביניים," in *מחקרים: שי להימן: מחקרים מעשיות על הגזירות בגרמניה בימי הביניים מוגשים לא"מ הברמן*, ed. Zvi Malachi (Jerusalem 1977), pp. 69–83, here no. 4, pp. 80f.

²⁹ Shim'on b. Yiṣḥaq died about seventy years before the First Crusade. A similarly inaccurate dating is implied in a note in MS Oxford Bodleiana Can. Or. 86 (Neubauer 1103; IMHM 17709), early 14th c., fol. 78^r, published in Neubauer's *Catalogue* (above, n. 14), col. 313.

³⁰ MS Warsaw ŻIH 253 (IMHM 10120), written in northern Italy in 1485, fol. 99^v; published in David, "סיפורי מעשיות" (above, n. 28), no. 2, p. 79.

for she will get satisfaction; her revenge will be to have brought disaster upon both herself and the community.³¹ Frightened, she consults R. Shim'on b. Yiṣḥaq for advice, who cries bitterly, telling her that there is no way to avert the decree (לבטל הגזרה), and goes on to pray that he may not see it. Indeed, he dies three days before the crusaders reach Mainz.

This narrative certainly takes an extreme position on the vexing question of what caused the massacres of 1096, although it is by no means clear “whether the Almighty’s wrath was kindled by the community’s overtaxing the widow, or by the well-heeled woman’s taxing of God’s patience.”³² However that may be, the ability of R. Shim'on b. Yiṣḥaq to interpret the voice emanating from the Torah shrine as a portent of things to come³³ fits in with the clairvoyance ascribed to him in the *Mayse Bukh*. This notion is shared by another narrative about Shim'on b. Yiṣḥaq, a short passage printed in Yeḥiel Heilprin’s *Seder hadorot* which is presented, once more, as a quotation from an old manuscript commentary on the prayerbook.³⁴ In this tale, three elderly men are seen walking through the Jewish quarter of Mainz, chanting in a soft voice, על הכל יתגדל ויתקדש: “on all of them may the Name of the Lord be magnified and hallowed.” When asked for an explanation, R. Shim'on replies that these three men were Avraham, Yiṣḥaq, and Ya'aqov warning the community of the imminent persecution and accepting the judgment of heaven.³⁵ R. Shim'on, however,

³¹ Ibid.: דומי דומי די לך די ליכי וקמתך תהי באופן שתקשי לך ולהם.

³² Eli Yassif, סיפור העם העברי (above, n. 18), p. 342. The quote here is from the English edition, *The Hebrew Folktales: History, Genre, Meaning*, trans. Jacqueline S. Teitelbaum (Bloomington, Indianapolis 1999), p. 314.

³³ For a tale featuring the possibly related motif of an angel delivering oracular speeches from a Torah shrine, see Joseph Dan, “סיפורים דימונולוגיים מכתבי ר' יהודה,” *Tarbiz* 30 (1960/61): 271–289, here no. 28, p. 288 and n. 85.

³⁴ Yeḥiel Heilprin, סדר הדורות (Karlsruhe 1768–69), vol. 1, fol. 52a-b. An English translation of the tale can be found in Bin Gorion, *Mimekor Yisrael* (above, n. 2), vol. 1, no. 228, pp. 432f. In Heilprin’s source, the tale seems to have been associated with Binjamin b. Ḥiyya’s *seliḥa* for the *musaf* service of Yom Kippur, ברית כרותה מלשכה, which explicitly refers to the massacres of 1096 and served as a peg to hang related legends on. See Goldschmidt, מחזור לימים הנוראים (above, n. 4), vol. 2, pp. 542ff.; Davidson, אוצר (above, n. 4), ב, 1717; cf. Urbach, ערוגת הבשם (above, n. 11), vol. 3, p. 290, vol. 4, pp. 180–185.

³⁵ This motif seems to combine several elements. For a tale of a number of men ominously walking the streets of Worms three days before the city’s destruction in 1689, see Wilhelm Müller, *Rheinhesisches Heimatbuch*, vol. 2 (Darmstadt 1924), pp. 141f. The acceptance of the judgment of heaven plays a major role in the Mainz section of two of the three Hebrew narratives on the persecutions of 1096, when the report two men give

worked in secrecy so that Ashmedai, king of demons, came with a huge army to meet their enemies and fight for the Jews. And he gave them a sign. If the blood was red all would be well, but if it was green, then whatever had to be would be. And indeed they found that Ashmedai was killed with them.³⁶

Again the narrator concludes with the tradition of Shim'on's own death three days before the massacres.³⁷

The third narrative is less enigmatic. It is a polemical story of a debate between R. Shim'on b. Yiṣḥaq of Coburg and the bishop of Bamberg, found in a manuscript translation of the *mahzor* into Yiddish dated 1504 (which, incidentally, may be the earliest piece of original narrative prose in that language to have reached us).³⁸ Arguing over the respective holiness of the city's magnificent cathedral and the Jewish community's rather shabby little synagogue, R. Shim'on makes the bishop promise to cause him no harm before he enters into a bet, predicting that an ass loaded with filth will not enter the synagogue but won't hesitate to defile the church, which the animal promptly does.

of having overheard the dead praying in the synagogue makes the community elders understand the scope of the impending disaster. See Adolf Neubauer and Moritz Stern (eds.), *Hebräische Berichte über die Judenverfolgungen während der Kreuzzüge* (Berlin 1892), pp. 4f., 52; cf. Joshua Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition* (repr. New York 1974), p. 62, and Dan, "סיפורים דימונולוגיים" (above, n. 33), no. 11, p. 281. On the motif of the dead conducting their own services in general folklore, see Ines Köhler, "Geistermesse," *Enzyklopädie des Märchens* 5 (1987): 933–939.

³⁶ Heilprin, סדר הדורות, fol. 52a: בחיל גדול בא בשדאי מלכא דשירא בא בחיל גדול ופועל בסוד שאשמדיי מלכא דשירא בא בחיל גדול ונתן ליהודים סימן אם יהיה הדם אדום יהיה טוב ואם לקראת השונאים ולהלחם בעד יהודים ונתן ליהודים סימן אם יהיה הדם אדום יהיה טוב ואם ליהיה ירוק מה שהיה היה וכן מצאו לאשמדיי נהרג עמהם. My translation is based on that of Lask in *Mimekor Yisrael* (above, n. 2), vol. 1, p. 433. However, unlike Bin Gorion I have used the first edition of the *Seder hadorot* rather than that edited by Naphtali Maskileison (Warsaw 1878–1882), vol. 1, fol. 98c-d, which reads the plural *ופועלו בסוד*, ascribing the secret appeal to Ashmedai to the patriarchs themselves, an emendation quite uncalled for. Ashmedai's death in 1096 is also reported, apparently from oral tradition, in MS Oxford Bodleiana Opp. 485/997 (Neubauer 1965), 17th c., fol. 249^v. See Gershom Scholem, "פרקים חדשים מענייני אשמדאי ויליית" *Tarbiz* 19 (1947/48): 160–175, esp. pp. 160f. (repr. in id., *מחקרי קבלה*, vol. 1 [Tel Aviv 1998], pp. 201–224, here pp. 202f.).

³⁷ For another parallel to this tradition, see the list of medieval *payyetanim* cited in Zunz, *Literaturgeschichte* (above, n. 19), p. 626. A contemporary preoccupation with the motif of the saintly person granted a merciful death before the catastrophe of 1096 is evident in Neubauer and Stern, *Hebräische Berichte* (above, n. 35), p. 13. For a leading scholar of Mainz whose death in 1095 is documented, see Grossman, *חכמי אשכנז* (above, n. 1), pp. 386f.

³⁸ MS London British Library Add. 18695 (Margoliouth 683, IMHM 4981), fols. 55^v–56^f. Cf. Meitlis, *Ma'assebuch* (above, n. 25), pp. 48f.; Zfatman-Biller, "הסיפורת" (above, n. 16), vol. 1, pp. 122f., 147; vol. 2, p. 87 n. 159. The text has not been published to date.

Furious but bound by his promise, the bishop orders R. Shim'on to leave the city at once. This having happened on the seventh day of Passover, R. Shim'on composes—and signs acrostically—a *piyyut* for that day³⁹ and goes on to settle in Mainz. Again, the tale is not original with our source; earlier, somewhat less crude variants can be found in *Megillat Ahima'as*⁴⁰ as well as the *Sefer nišṣaḥon yashan*.⁴¹ In our context, the narrative is remarkable for the way it integrates an oral tradition which apparently originated among the Jews of Coburg or nearby Bamberg (neither of which had a Jewish community in R. Shim'on's lifetime) with those aspects of his biography which, indeed, seem to have been common knowledge: that in fact he had lived and was buried in Mainz—and, the narrator adds, “I have visited his grave.”⁴² Although neither the miraculous spring nor the mirrors are

³⁹ The reference is to *יה שבטי יה*, the *meshalleš* of Shim'on's *qedushta* for the seventh day of Passover beginning *או ביעין ראינו או בעין*, the translation of which immediately follows our tale in the manuscript. For the *piyyut*, see Habermann's edition (above, n. 3), pp. 64f.; Jonah Fraenkel (ed.), *מחזור פסח לפי מנהגי בני אשכנז לכל ענפיהם* (Jerusalem 1993), pp. 483ff.; cf. Davidson, *אוצר* (above, n. 4), א 2075, and the annotated German translation in Hollender, *Synagogale Hymnen* (above, n. 3), pp. 112–117.

⁴⁰ Benjamin Klar (ed.), *מגילת אחימעץ* (repr. Jerusalem 1974), p. 18; English translation in Marcus Salzman (trans.), *The Chronicle of Ahimaaz* (New York 1924), pp. 70f.

⁴¹ David Berger (ed.), *The Jewish-Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages* (Philadelphia 1979), no. 41, pp. 28f. (text), 68f. (translation). On the two earlier versions, see also Israel Jacob Yuval, “Heilige Städte, heilige Gemeinden – Mainz als das Jerusalem Deutschlands,” in *Jüdische Gemeinden und Organisationsformen von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart*, eds. Robert Jütte and Abraham P. Kustermann (Wien 1996), pp. 91–101, here 99ff.

⁴² MS London Add. 18695, fol. 56': *אונ' קאם גען מענץ דא בליב ער אונ' זיין קבורה די*. It is worth noting that although there was no Jewish community in Mainz from 1471 until 1583, permission was given in 1492 for a single Jewish resident to look after visitors, one of whose less official functions may have been to direct anyone thus inclined to the graves of the pre-1096 *gedolim*. After the cemetery had been vandalized in 1438, R. Shim'on's grave does not seem to have been marked; however, evidence of its contemporary localization in the northwestern corner of the cemetery may be found in the use of that area as the site chosen for the interment of deceased rabbis, much like the “Rabbinertal” surrounding the Maharil's grave in Worms, from the seventeenth century onward. Only in 1762 did the *hevra qaddisha* erect a memorial for Shim'on b. Yišṣaq near the spot identified as his grave. A medieval headstone bearing the inscription *זה קבר רבנא ר' שמעון בר יצחק נשמתו לחיי עד*, itself apparently a 12th-century replacement of the original, was unearthed during construction works in Mainz in 1922 and restored to the “Denkmalfriedhof” section of the cemetery in 1926, where it remains today. See Friedrich Schütz, “Mainz,” in *Germania Judaica*, vol. 3, pt. 2, eds. Arye Maimon, Mordechai Breuer and Yacov Guggenheim (Tübingen 1995), pp. 786–831, here pp. 805f.; Jonas Bondi, “Der alte Friedhof,” *Menorah* 5 (1927): 718–728, esp. pp. 720f.; Siegmund Salfeld, “Mainzer jüdische Grabsteine, gefunden im Jahre 1922,” *Mainzer Zeitschrift* 17/19 (1921–24): 62–65, here no. 2, p. 63.

mentioned, the narrator's introduction of R. Shim'on does call him a *ba'al shem*—a title the tale itself does nothing to justify, which makes it appear as another case of the shorthand described above.

These, then, are the elements that the composite image of Shim'on b. Yiṣḥaq is made up of: a clairvoyant, a *ba'al shem*, a protector of the community—and there is one more. This is not to be found in a narrative source but in a halakhic discussion over the legitimacy of introducing *piyyuṭim* into the *amida* which has been preserved in the twelfth-century *Mahzor Vitry*, where R. Shim'on's practice is commended on account of his having been **מְלוֹמֵד בְּנִסִּים**, “experienced in miracles”.⁴³ The passage is attributed to Rabbenu Tam quoting his own father. It is thus our earliest source so far, and it may give us a clue as to what to make of all of this.

What does “experienced in miracles” mean? The phrase is talmudic; it is also quite rare.⁴⁴ Most prominently, it is used with regard to R. Shim'on bar Yoḥai (Rashbi) in a well-known *aggada* recorded in the Babylonian Talmud (bMeil 17b). In a setting supposed to reflect the situation after the Bar Kokhba revolt,⁴⁵ the evil government in Rome has decreed decrees (**גְּזֵרָה גְּזִירוֹת**), forbidding the Jews to keep the Sabbath, to circumcise their sons, and to observe the laws of *nidda*. Who will be going to Rome to have the decrees revoked? When nobody volunteers, Shim'on bar Yoḥai is chosen on account of his being **מְלוֹמֵד בְּנִסִּים**—the reference being, Rashi explains, to the even better-known tradition of the miracles that kept him alive during the years he spent hidden in a cave (and writing the *Zohar*, according to later tradition).⁴⁶ And sure enough, a miracle is performed for him. While on his way to Italy, Rashbi is approached by a demon who introduces himself as Ben Temalyon and offers to help by possessing the Roman emperor's daughter, thereby giving Rashbi a chance to make himself

⁴³ *Mahzor Vitry* (above, n. 18), vol. 1, no. 325, p. 364. Cf. Elbogen, *Gottesdienst* (above, n. 3), p. 562; Grossman, **חֲכָמֵי אֲשְׁכֵּנִי** (above, n. 1), pp. 94f. For the context, see Ruth Langer, “Kalir Was a Tanna: Rabbenu Tam's Invocation of Antiquity in Defense of the Ashkenazi Payyetic Tradition,” *HUCA* 67 (1996): 95–106.

⁴⁴ See Dan Ben-Amos, “Historical Poetics and Generic Shift: *Niphla'ot ve-Nissim*,” *Fabula* 35 (1994): 20–49, esp. pp. 43ff.

⁴⁵ On the historical background of the tale (or lack thereof), see Peter Schäfer, *Der Bar Kokhba-Aufstand* (Tübingen 1981), pp. 212f.

⁴⁶ bShab 33b–34a. Cf., most recently, Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories: Narrative Art, Composition and Culture* (Baltimore, London 1999), pp. 105–138; Ben-Zion Rosenfeld, “R. Simeon b. Yoḥai—Wonder-worker and Magician, Scholar, *Saddiq* and *Hasid*,” *REJ* 158 (1999): 349–384, esp. pp. 364–369.

useful to the emperor. Once in Rome, Shim'on bar Yoḥai easily exorcises the demon; out of gratitude, the emperor revokes the decrees.

The tale of R. Shim'on's journey to Rome was very popular in the Middle Ages. It was retold in a number of medieval collections;⁴⁷ it also informed a number of "new" tales.⁴⁸ As early as in one version of the *Halakhot gedolot*, the rather obscure Ben Temalyon was replaced with the far more familiar Ashmedai, whose role as an essentially benevolent, Torah-abiding Jewish king of the demons is well attested in medieval sources.⁴⁹

Experienced in miracles, instrumental in averting decrees, a *ba'al shem* enlisting a demon's help in order to save the Jewish community from an existential threat: when seen against the backdrop of bMeil 17b, many of the details in the traditions on R. Shim'on *hagadol* fall into place. They indicate to what extent the posthumous image of Shim'on b. Yiṣḥaq was modelled on that of his talmudic namesake. Was there ever a persecution in Mainz that Shim'on b. Yiṣḥaq did help to avert? We do not know.⁵⁰ The spring at his grave, on the other hand,

⁴⁷ See e.g. *הלכות גדולות* (Venice 1547), fol. 137d; Salomon Buber (ed.), *מדרש זוטא* (Frankfurt am Main 1894), pp. 78–80; Moses Gaster, *The Exempla of the Rabbis* (repr. New York 1968), Heb. sect., no. XIX, pp. 15f.; Jellinek, *בית המדרש* (above, n. 2), vol. 4, pp. 117f.; vol. 6, pp. 128ff.

⁴⁸ For the tale of R. Shefatya traveling to Constantinople in order to have a decree revoked, see *מגילת אחימעץ* (above, n. 40), pp. 18f. (= Salzman, pp. 71ff.); cf. Eli Yassif, "סיפורים עממיים ב'מגילת אחימעץ' ונגילגוליהם במסורות שבעל פה בימי הביניים," in *יד להימן* (above, n. 2), pp. 41–56, esp. pp. 46f. For a closely related journey to Rome in an Old Yiddish novella, see Erika Timm, "Beria und Simra: Eine jiddische Erzählung des 16. Jahrhunderts," *Literaturwissenschaftliches Jahrbuch* N.F. 14 (1973): 1–94, esp. pp. 50ff.

⁴⁹ Esriel Hildesheimer (ed.), *הלכות גדולות* (Berlin 1888–1890), pp. 601–604 (reproducing the text of an 11th-century MS); cf. Israel Lévi, "Encore un mot sur la légende de Bartalmion," *REJ* 10 (1885): 66–73, esp. pp. 70ff. On Ashmedai as a "Jewish" demon, see Gershom Scholem, "Demons, Demonology—In Kabbalah," *EJ* 5 (1971): 1528–1533, esp. col. 1530; id., "פרקים חדשים" (above, n. 36), pp. 160–163 (= *מחקרי קבלה*, vol. 1, pp. 201–206).

⁵⁰ The *Memorbuch* reference to such activities on his part does not seem to be of much help. While a thorough study of the available manuscripts has yet to be undertaken, the text in the earliest of these, the Mainz or Nuremberg *Memorbuch* begun in 1296, appears fairly generic. In fact, the phrase *טרה עבור קהילות וביטל גזירות* is a standard element in the catalogue of good deeds communal benefactors could be remembered for. The abolition of taxes and tolls, ascribed to R. Shim'on in MS Oxford Bodleiana Mich. 328/537 (Neubauer 1108) and accepted by Grossman, *חכמי אשכנז* (above, n. 1), p. 95, for reasons of *lectio difficilior*, is simply another. Cf. the *yizkor* for the communities in general printed in Salfeld, *Martyrologium* (above, n. 7), p. 86, and included, in one version or other, in most of the later textual witnesses as well: *זכור אלהים ושמות כל: הקהילות [...] שטרחו עבור קהילות ובטלו גזירות ובטלו מכסים והוציאו ספרי תורות מידי גוים*.

is quite obviously a reflection of the spring near Rashbi's cave in Peqī'in. Indeed, well into the 19th century the place where he was buried in Mainz was known as the *cave* of R. Shim'on the Great.⁵¹ Several manuscripts recording mystical traditions of *ḥaside Ashkenaz* preserve the name of R. Shim'on—without a patronymic—in a list of *ba'ale shem* and the holy names each of them brought down from heaven.⁵² According to Gershom Scholem, the reference here is to Shim'on b. Yiṣḥaq, and, as we have seen, that may well be the case.⁵³ Still, if one seventeenth-century manuscript identifies that same R. Shim'on as Shim'on bar Yoḥai,⁵⁴ this may show to what extent, in some Ashkenazic minds, the two had become interchangeable. This latter instance, of course, may betray the influence of the *Zohar*. The composite picture of R. Shim'on b. Yiṣḥaq as reconstructed here, however, sheds light on the way Ashkenazic Jews perceived the figure of Shim'on bar Yoḥai *before* they became aware of the *Zohar*. Conversely, it allows us a glimpse into the way received models were put to new use in the construction of historical memory in medieval and early modern Ashkenaz.

Indeed, the *Memorbuch* begun at Hanau in 1601 (MS Jerusalem JNUL Heb. 8° 3222), fol. 6^r, records that Shim'on b. Yiṣḥaq had saved Torah scrolls from the hands of non-Jews! Another group of manuscripts testifies to the efforts later scribes made to “individualize” the necrology of the sages of earlier generations; then Gershom was commemorated for his *תקנות*, Shim'on for his *פיוטים*, Rashi for his *פירושים*, and so on. This is the case, for instance, in the *Memorbuch* tradition of Worms represented in the MS printed by Abraham Berliner, “ספר הזכרת נשמות קהילת ורמיישא,” *Qoveṣ 'al yad* 3 (1887): 3–62, here p. 5, and quoted in Grossman, *ibid.*, p. 87 n. 38.

⁵¹ Abraham M. Tendlaw, *Das Buch der Sagen und Legenden jüdischer Vorzeit* (Stuttgart 1842), p. 243; Bondi, “Friedhof” (above, n. 42), pp. 720f.

⁵² Gershom Scholem, “האם נתגלה עובון הסודות של אבו אהרון הבבלי?” *Tarbiz* 32 (1963): 252–265, esp. pp. 254ff.

⁵³ For additional evidence of mystical techniques ascribed to R. Shim'on *hagadol*, see Ephraim Kanarfogel, “Peering Through the Lattices”: *Mystical, Magical, and Pietistic Dimensions in the Tosafist Period* (Detroit 2000), pp. 134f.

⁵⁴ Scholem, “האם נתגלה” (above, n. 52), p. 256 n. 10, p. 257 n. 13.