# The role of women in Jewish Magic

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**Abbreviations**

**Bible**

| | |
|---|---|
| Deut. | Deuteronomy |
| Exod. | Exodus |
| Ezek. | Ezekiel |
| Gen. | Genesis |
| Isa. | Isaiah |
| Jer. | Jeremiah |
| Lev. | Leviticus |
| Mal. | Malachi |
| Nah. | Nahum |
| Sam. | Samuel |

**Mishnah and Talmud**

| | |
|---|---|
| b | Babylonian Talmud |
| m | Mishnah |
| y | Jerusalem Talmud |
| Ab. | Aboth |
| A.Zar. | AbodahZarah |
| Ber. | Berakoth |
| Erub. | Erubim |
| Gitt. | Gittin |
| Hag. | Hagigah |
| Hull. | Hullin |
| Kidd. | Kiddushin |
| Peah | Peah |
| Pes. | Pesachim |

| | |
|---|---|
| Rosh. Hash. | Rosh ha Shanah |
| Sanh. | Sanhedrin |
| Shab. | Shabbath |
| Shek. | Shekalim |
| Sot. | Sotah |
| Yom. | Yoma |

# Chapter I. Introduction: Judaism, magic, and sorcery

## Introduction

This thesis focuses on the role of women in some aspects of Jewish magicas seen in a variety of sources –literary, historical, epigraphical – from the Tannaitic and Gaonic periods. In particular, the thesis analyses the relationships between woman, sorcery, and food in the Talmudic period. From a sociological stand point, it is essential to understand how women behaved, and in what kind of society they lived.Hopefully, this thesis will contribute to better define the boundaries between what was socially considered a sorceress and her activities, and what was considered to be the natural activities of a woman at that time. The topic, however, is enormous, and as a consequence the present thesis limits itself to the consideration and identification of women thought to be sorceresses, and not women in general. Inevitably, the thesis only explores some aspects that are part of a much more general discourse.

The thesis is divided in three chapters and a conclusion. The first chapter contextualises the topic, defining the main terms employed, and how they are used in this thesis, for example, “magic”, “sorcery” and “witchcraft”. This is necessary in order to clarify all the differences and nuances that these diverse terms bear. After clarifying these semantics, a brief review of the practice of magic in Late Antiquity is presented which considers writings found in sources as varied as biblical and rabbinic literature, and on amulets, gems, magic bowls. Evaluationswere made as to the relevance of these available sources regarding the topic of this thesis. The first chapter also gives an insight into the rabbinic point of view regarding magic, since the majority of sources considered are theirs. As it will be presented later on, at that time, rabbis were not a homogeneous reality. Indeed, it must be kept in mind in dealing with the biblical and rabbinic sources, and with case studies that Judaism was not an unvarying reality, and was composed of diverse attitudes, behaviours, and points of view. The present thesis, however, focuses on the rabbinic attitudes toward magic and women.

The second chapter presents some introductory considerations on women, sorceresses and society followed by a study of the sources, both biblical and rabbinical. These two sources differ greatly in general, and, more specifically, they differ in how they deal with the topic of the present thesis. Both sources are important and taken into consideration, but given the undeniable importance of rabbinic sources more emphasis is put on the rabbinic sources, since it is there that the relationships between women, sorceresses and food are stressed.

The third chapter connects women and magic through food. The reason for considering this connection is that, frequently, food is present in some rabbinic narratives, whichfocused on sorcery. In particular, some relevant fragments from the Babylonian Talmud areanalysed in order to shed light on the topic.

### I.1. General Framework and Definitions

It is possible to state that for the Second Temple period there is a substantial lack of sources regarding the practice of magic, while in Late Antiquity the sources are numerous. Undoubtedly, however, from various sources it can be inferred that magic and sorcery had a prominent role in the life of the Jews living both in Palestine and in Mesopotamia. In wider terms, Jews did not have anindifferent attitude concerning sorcery, i.e., they believed in its power[1].

It is essentialto first clarify the three terms that we are going to use: magic, sorcery and witchcraft. This semantic clarification is fundamental since these terms are not synonymous. Indeed, they express different nuances, and theiruse should be accurate and not interchangeable. The term magic, the most general of the three, can include sorcery and witchcraft. Magicis usually employed when one refers to all the magical practices, beliefs and rituals. All the phenomena that are part of the supernatural world are, thus, indicated by the term magic. Indeed, actions and attitudes connected to the supernatural

[1]Safrai. 1987. *The Literature of the Sages. Second Part: Midrash and Targum, Liturgy, Poetry, Mysticism, Contracts, Inscriptions, Ancient Science and the Languages of Rabbinic Literature. Compendia Rerum Iudicarum Ad Novum Testamentum*. Section II. Fortress Press, 522.

dimension are included in the category of magic. Magic implies the idea of an interaction between human beings and the world. In summary, magic refers to all the practices that can determine changes in accord to human will. The term magic does not specify the positivity or negativity of events, actions, and attitudes; rather the term “black magic” is used to specify the negative and harmful magic.

Sorcery and black magic are the most appropriate terms for this current study, and are usedtogether with witchcraft in order to highlight negative outcomes. The malignity expressed by these terms may be directedtowards both human beings and/or things. Frequently, with the term sorcery refers to *actions* that are inclined to affect persons or their belongings harmfully, and witchcraft refers very often to a folkloristic aspect, which this study is less concerned with.

Regarding these terms, it is important to keep in mind what Harari pointed out about the terminological problematics [2] . The philosopher L. Wittgenstein, in his *Philosophical Investigations*[3], explains how there is an undeniable difficulty in defining precisely what are the limits of the application of the terms within a language. These general problems of language, certainly, arise also when one wants to define andcorrectly use the terms magic, sorcery and witchcraft.

Bearing in mind those difficulties, however, the present study focuses on the phenomenological approach to magic, rather than on a lexical analysis[4]. Nevertheless, in principle, the definition of magic and related terms is necessary. In summary, black magic, sorcery, and witchcraft are specific practices of magic that emphasise the negative consequences on human beings and/or things.

[2]Harari. 2005. *What is a magical text? Methodological reflections aimed at redefining early Jewish magic*. na, 109.
[3] Wittgenstein. 1984. *Philosophical investigation*, Oxford.
[4]Safrai. 1987: 523.

## I.2. The practice of magic in ancient Judaism

Without a doubt, Judaism in antiquity was not a monolithic reality. Indeed, while Judaism had many diverse, unchanging aspects that could be considered as typical of it, it also had many dissimilar ways of living it. Judaism was a multifaceted reality that presented differences concerning doctrinal definitions, lifestyle and devotion[5]. A good example of this *multi-coloured* world can be seen during the Second Temple period. The diverse tendencies and attitudes in the lifestyle of the Jews have to be considered because they help to understand the ancient times.

Historically, the downfall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. led to the Pharisee sect gaining power, and as a result, prevailing over the other sects. In particular, as Flavius Josephus pointed outin his *Antiquities of the Jews*, there were three sects in Judaism at that time, the Pharisees, the Sadducees and the Essenes, each of which perceived reality differently[6]. The Sadducees focused on Temple practices and having good relations with the Roman authority[7]. They did not take into account any doctrine that was not clearly present in the Pentateuch. The Pharisees, on the other hand, gave great importance to the Law and to the traditions, studying and applying them in the daily life. In all likelihood their power increased because of their application and study of the Law which focused more on respecting the Law and handing it down, and was not limited to Temple practices. As already said, the Pharisees were the only sect, which survived after the destruction of the Temple, and a good explanation of their cultural survival is that they did not focus only on the Temple practices and rituals. The Essenes saw God's will in everything that happens, and they strongly believed in its supremacy. Finally, it is clear that the differences in the interpretation of the Law, Temple rituals and views of life were

[5]Rinaldi. 2008. *Cristianesimi nell'antichità: sviluppi storici e contesti geografici (secoli I-VIII)*. GBU, 148-150.
[6]Flavio. 2013.*Antichità Giudaiche*, a cura di Luigi Moraldi, Torino, Utet (Classici delle religioni) 2 voll, 794.
[7] Saldarini. 1988. *Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees in Palestinian Society: A Sociological Approach.* Wilmington: Glazier.

substantial. Each sect bore its own characteristics; indeed, all the previously mentioned factors shaped Judaism into a non-uniform reality.

Based on these characteristics of the diverse sects, some considerations on the posterior age, the Rabbinic Judaism, can be formulated.

Rabbinic Judaism originated from Pharisaic Judaism and since the 6th century CE became the principal theme present in Judaism. Accordingly, Rabbinic Judaism prevailed, relativelylate on the other forms of non-rabbinic Judaism. Therefore, while one is talking about Judaism of the first centuries of Common Era it is important not to confuse the behaviour of the rabbis with that of the ordinary people. Ordinary people and the society as a whole, tried to adapt their lifestyle to the one imposed by Rabbinic Judaism only many years later. The affirmation of Rabbinic Judaism was a gradual phenomenon and required time and effort. Thus, all those remarks and rifts help understand the society, and all the nuances that characterised it.

Going back to the topic of magic, that is the most fascinating aspect that dominated ancient times, it is significant to affirm that, almost in each period of Jewish history, magic was part of the daily religious experience. However, what changed during the time was the *official* consideration that Judaism had towards magic. Hence, a good consideration is that already in the Bible there were many different attitudes concerning magic that were quite disharmonious, andthat the rabbinic sources of the Talmudic period presented a very ambiguous approach concerning magical practices.

Furthermore, on this basis one can say that, especially during the period of Late Antiquity, magic was so widely spread in the Jewish society that it was in fact part of the Jewish culture. Certainly, magic could have had many diverse values and meanings and indeed, it could have been used as a non-canonical practice or as an alternative to the main religious practices[8].

[8]Safrai 1987: 523.

## I.3. Written sources

### Amulets, gems and bowls

Written sources concerning Jewish magic were found on different type of material. According to Bohak, just considering the late antique magical texts, one encounters at least seven different types of artefacts, of which amulets were the most common[9]. Amulets were generally inscribed on narrow metal sheets, or more technically, *lamellae*; on these kinds of materials it is easy to find amulets against various types of diseases, evil spirits, and the perils connected with pregnancy or birth. Aggressive or erotic spells have been found, especially on papyri and magical gems. Amulets on sheets of parchment were probably also in use, but very few of them remain from Antiquity, while there is a large number of them from the Middle Ages onwards[10].

In order to be used, amulets written on sheets were rolled and folded into specific containers. These containers were usually metal tubes or small leather pouches. The languages present in the amulets were mostly Hebrew and/or Aramaic, and as a result, the amulets have always been ascribed to Jewish magic practitioners. There is, however, also evidence that Jewish practitioners also frequently worked for non-Jewish customers, even for Christians[11]. Jewish amulets often emerge from the antiquary market, but it is presumed that, given their private nature, most of them originate from ancient graves and houses. It appears that in many cases the name of the clientwas added at the very last moment, and that the amulets were, in some ways, prefabricated. However, there are also amulets without any name, and are identified as generic amulets. Some of these amulets were certainly produced for a specific person, and sometimes contain more details about the customer and his needs.

[9]Bohak.2008. *Ancient Jewish magic: A history*. Cambridge University Press, 150.
[10]Bohak. 2008:153.
[11] Lacerenza. 2002. Jewish Magicians and Christian Clients in Late Antiquity: The Testimony of Amulets and Inscriptions, in *What Athens has to do with Jerusalem. Essays on Classical, Jewish, and Early Christian Art and Archaeology in Honor of Gideon Foerster*, ed. by Leonard V. Rutgers, Peeters, Leuven, 393-419.

Another type of popular magical artefact were gems. They were expensive objects compared to the amulets inscribed on cheap metals (e.g., lead), and their high price was due more to the workmanship than to the material[12]. This possibly explains why there are few magical gems that can be directly connected to Jewish magic, or bear inscriptions in Hebrew or Jewish Aramaic[13].

It is very important to also look at the Babylonian incantation bowls. The Babylonian incantation bowls are great in number, and they are certainlydemanding sources to deal with. They are dated roughly to a period encompassing the fifth, or sixth, to the eighth century CE. Accordingly, frequently, the places where the bowls were discovered, and the date to which they were ascribed, is matter of debate owing to the fact that the magic bowls are damaged. As Bohak pointed out, the bowls usually have writing inside and may bear drawings as well[14]. The bowl sizes and shapesvary greatly. Since magic bowls were not an expensive artefact to produce, they were quite widely spread. Theywere used as a surface on which certain people could engrave their magical spells. Five types of writing were used, among which square Aramaic script was one of the most popular. There were also Mandaic, Syriac, cursive Pahlavi and Arabic scripts.[15]

In all likelihood, the owners of the bowls were different kinds of people, and frequently, the bowls were placed in the house. Concerning the content of the spells written on the bowls, habitually they were apotropaic. There were some different types of evil spirits and forces which undermined the serenity of a family, of the house, or of a single person. The belief was that magical bowls could protect people from sorcery. Magic bowls were placed at home, where their function was to safeguard the family. Indeed, people did not carry around magic bowls, and indeed, once they were placed in a room or in a corner, they were not removed. Curiously, sometimes, the fixed location in which the magic bowl should be placed was written on the bowl itself. The drawings represented on the bowls surfaces were demons, animals and other figures. Anyhow, some magical bowls also borespells intended

[12]Bohak 2008: 158.
[13]Bohak 2008: 164.
[14]Bohak 2008: 184.
[15]Bohak 2008: 185.

to harm someone or to make someone fall in love with someone else. The existence of magic bowls support the idea that Jews, both in Palestine and in Babylonia, used magic and believed in its power.

**Handbooks**

The existence of manuals and handbooks containing collections of magic recipes is well attested in the Judaic environment only from Late Antiquity onwards. The presence of manuals and handbooks help us to understand that the magical activity was not just an extemporaneous activity performed by persons who were barely literate. However,it could be viewed also as a more systematic activity and probably, in a few cases, performed by skilled people who were expert in that field.

Close examinations of these recipes show that there existed a precise and fixed scheme even in the production of magical artefacts that was elaborated on a specific representation of the world. Of course, authors and collectors of such materials were in some way educated people, and in some cases, probably with a decent level of knowledge. It appears that people who wrote and copied these texts were cultured regarding the Bible as well as other traditions, such as rabbinic and mystical texts. As for the contents, magical handbooks dealt with almost all circumstances of life such as birth and death. Concerning the texts that have arrived to us, the most ancient one is the *Eight Books of Moses* that belongs to the vast corpus of Egyptian *Papyri Graecae Magicae* (PGM), where it is possible to trace many elements belonging to Jewish magic, even though syncretized with Pagan and Christian elements [16] . From Late Antique period onwards, the bestknown book of magic is undoubtedly the *Sefer ha-Razim*, or the Book of the Mysteries, allegedly composed in the

[16]For the PGM, Greek text in Preisendanz- Henrichs 1973-74; English translation in Betz 1992. *The Eight Book of Moses* can be found in PGM XIII. K. Preisendanz, *Papyri Graecae Magicae: Die grechischen Zauber papyri*, A. Henrichs ed., 2 vols., Stuttgart 1973-1974; H.D. Betz. 1992. (ed.), *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation, Including the Demotic Spells*, Chicago U.P.

Talmudic period[17]. After the aboveconsiderations on the written sources, it is important to look at the rabbinical point of view on magic, which is presented in the following paragraph.

### I.4. Rabbinic views on magic and sorcery

Following, in part, the biblical prescription in which it is stated that magic, and more specifically sorcery, are banned activities *a priori,* it is not surprising that Rabbinic Judaism undertakes, from its beginning, basically, the same attitude towards sorcery. Certainly, this adverse behaviour was based on a general aversion towards magical practices. At the same time, however, rabbis were aware that the biblical texts provided also some glimmers on the possibility of practicing magic; this is clear in the parts where the text does not state a specific or explicit prohibition regarding those practices. Indeed, the Torah offered various usage examples of apparently accepted magical arts; see for example the figures of Moses and Aaron which frequently refer to them and by doing so they legitimise, at least in part, those practices. Obviously, like any other area of interest rabbis had many diverse attitudes and non-uniform answers.

More generally, it is possible to consider that at the early stage of Rabbinic Literature - represented by the text of the Mishnah - prevailed, as regards to magic, a behaviour of great opposition carried on by the first generation of the Sages: “Harlotry and sorcery have destroyed everything” (mSot 9:3). In this context, and at this time, one could say that magical practices were refused mostly because were considered as the proper expression of foreign cultures and people. Thus, according to (mShab. 6:10) where the magical practices were described as “the ways of the Amorites”. Following this point of view, it is plausible, even though it seems exaggerated, that the episode in which the *Nasi* of the Sanhedrin rabbi Shimon ben Shetah hanged eighty witches in a single day in the city of Ashkelon (mSanh. 6:4; ySanh. 6:6). The story seemed to refer to an episode of idolatry,

[17] Text in Margoliouth 1966; new edition in Rebiger and Scäfer 2009 English translation available in Morgan 1983.

conceived as foreign practices, then to a case of sorcery[18]. This episode will be dealt with more in depth in the second chapter. Moreover, it is surprising that the Mishnah prescribes a death penalty through stoning for sorcerers (mSanh. 7:7) based on the norm: "You shall not suffer the sorceresses to live" (Exod. 22:17). Thus, it is possible to underline that sorcery was punishable by stoning, which was undoubtedly a very brutal way of killing (mSanh. 7:4)[19].

On the other hand, moreover, it is interesting to make some considerations regarding trickery. Indeed, it is possible to consider, that sorcery and trickery were sometimes associated in rabbinic sources. This clearly shows that, first of all, some Sages approached magical practices along the same lines of a somewhat minor transgression (at least, in religious perspective) and that, according to them, magic and/or sorcery were no less than a fraud. Subsequently, even if both sorcery and trickery were considered negative practices, each had a different degree of negativity. Indeed, practicing trickery was considered a dishonest and negative act, even though people who practiced it were not liable (mSanh. 7:11). This topic has been elaborated, for instance, in the well known, though in some ways obscure, text of bSanh. 67b:

> The laws of sorcery may be compared to the laws of the Sabbath, they possess (the category of death) "by stoning", and they have (the category of) "exempt (from punishment) but (the act is) prohibited", (and the category of) "permitted *a priori"*: one who commits an act-( is punished) "by stoning"; one who tricks – is "exempt but (the act is ) prohibited"; (the category of) "permitted *a priori"* as in the case of RavHanina and RavOshaya. Every Sabbath eve they occupied themselves with the laws concerning the Creation and a three-year old heifer was created for them and they consumed it.

This is a rather emblematic quotation from the Babylonian Talmud, in which we move from a drastic sentence against magic to a magical experience accomplished by two esteemed sages of the third rabbinic generation. As this latter case shows – obviously not to be taken literally – rabbis could have access to practical magic. According to the text, these two sages avail themselves of the laws of creation and form a living creature *ex nihilo*. Their magical capacity came from their knowledge and competence in matters of Scripture, and in some

[18]Efron. 1987. *Studies on the Hasmonean period*. Vol. 39. Leiden: Brill.
[19]Safrai 1987:524.

ways the episode was meant to confirm that rabbinical magic was saintly and, above all, a kind of superior magic since it was based on the supreme power of the Name[20].

As the latter episode, and its relative context, indicated clearly enough, it is undeniable that, over time, even in the rabbinic setting and especially in the Babylonian Talmud, there were embodied less rigid behaviours and more tolerance even towards magic. Therefore, it is useful to have a look at the Babylonian Talmud in which it is possible to find whole sections with diverse types of magical recipes, magical practices, divination, etc. The different ideological backgrounds underlying this change in attitude essentially reflects the idea that the Wise is legitimised to perform "miracles". To the extent that he relies on the power of the Torah, and on the awareness of the origin of the power from God, and not from unknown or occult, or even from *sitraaḥra* (Satan) because אין עוד מלבדו ("there is no one else beside Him", Deut. 4:35). This awareness of their ethical force, that could also be understood as a superior magical force compared to the one of sorceresses or sorcerers, is quite apparent from bHull. 7b // bSanh. 67b-68a:

> *There is none else besides Him*. R. Haninasaid: Even by sorcery. A woman once attempted to take earth from under R. Hanina's feet. He said to her, "If you succeed in your attempts, go and practise it.[21] It is written, however, *There is none else beside him*". But that is not so, for did not R. Johanan say: Why are they called *mekashshefim*? Because they lessen the power of the Divine agencies? — R. Hanina was in a different category, owing to his abundant merit.

As already stated, it is possible to affirm, once again, that the Babylonian Talmud offers much more material compared to the Palestinian Talmud regarding the relation between rabbis and magic. Without a doubt, this is due in large part to the presence of a specific cultural heritage which has its roots in the ancient civilizations of Mesopotamia and in which the presence of magic in every aspect of daily life is widely attested. Despite the obvious differences, the persistence in the Mesopotamic area of preventive ritual exorcism, such as those in the sequence of *Maqlû*

[20]Stratton. 2005. "Imagining power: Magic, miracle, and the social context of rabbinic self-representation." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 73.2:366.
[21]It appears that R. Hanina was aware that the earth had to be used for witchcraft.

"burning" (sorcerer), presume a rootedness in this type of fear and conception that helps to better understand the Jewish spells in Talmudic texts as well as in magical bowls and amulets[22].

Perhaps not wrongly, Seidel, and earlier Douglas, inferred that the milieu in which the Babylonian *Amoraim* lived could be labelled a "witchcraft society"[23]. Rabbis, at least as depicted in their literature, considered themselves to be figures who safeguarded the society from foreign customs, ritual contamination and evil. This was sorcery in the widest meaning of the word and included, in this context, evil spells. Thus, in order to protect their people, they availed themselves of apotropaic counter-spells.

It is possible to assume that Babylonian rabbis inherited, in some ways, a significant part of magic traditions from ancient Mesopotamia. However, it must be remembered that we do not find traces of *all* the ancient magic traditions in the rabbinic literature. If we look, for instance, at the spells included in the Sefer Ha-Razim – which was also subject to a form of "rabbinization" – we do see that, besides some parts which can be considered "purely" Jewish, the bulk of materials belong to ancient Near Eastern[24] and, especially to the common Mediterranean (i.e., Graeco-Egyptian) magical heritage. According to Geller, in this sense, there is a comparison that should be made between Mesopotamian magic bowls and the later Aramaic magic bowls whichbelong to the same area. It is possible to track down a parallel, and indeed, it seems that the general trend regarding magic was similar. There are similar elements in sources from the Palestinian and the Babylonian Talmud, for example, the formulas, the names of the demons and the appeals against them. It is undeniably surprising to find these similarities between Mesopotamian magic and the later tradition. In addition, the Babylonian Talmud contains some Akkadian loanwords that are expressions taken from Akkadian incantation into Talmud. It is possible that the Talmud presented some traditions from an earlier period, in which Akkadian was a living language[25].Regarding the Hellenistic world, it is possible to see the spread of Jewish magic

[22]Seidel. 1992. "Release us and we will release you!" Rabbinic Encounters with Witches and Witchcraft."*The Journal of the Association of Graduates in Near Eastern Studies*3:47.

[23]Seidel 1992: 46.

[24]In this sphere, Akkadian curses gained quite easily, via their Aramaic linguistic transmission, their way to the Sages living in the Babylonian environment: see Abusch. 1989. *Babylonian witchcraft literature: case studies*. No. 132. Scholars Press, 29.

[25]Geller. 2005. *Tablets and magic bowls*. Leiden: Brill, 53.

by looking at Greek magical papyri. Indeed archangels like Michael and Gabriel and more relevant Iao Sabbao are mentioned in them[26].

By taking into consideration that sorcery was an indisputable and tangible reality during the Late Antiquity period, it is easier to understand why rabbis were naturally against it. Since the Jews lived in a Diaspora, and hence were living among foreign peoples, according to the rabbis the perception of society and reality was impure. The rabbi's discomfort in such a situation can be easily understood since they aimed at and wanted to build and live in an ideal and pure society. This also helps to explain why, despite the general rabbinic contempt regarding the practice of magic, the Talmud had to deal with it, since magic and sorcery were consideredto be negative, albeit something that was an unavoidable part of the societies they lived in. Of course, magic operators and rabbis were not involved in sorcery in the same way.One could think that, in a hypothetical society without sorcery and magic, the rabbis would have no reason to be involved with such despicable matters. However, as we know, the reality was very different and the rabbis had to face them almost in every aspect of everyday life.

In the Babylonian Talmud, there is some evidence that show rabbis as being capable of using counter spells to protect themselves from any type of magical attacks (see: bHull. 105b; bPes. 110a; bSanh. 67b; analysed in chapter III). In other stories, (bSanh. 68a) rabbis are showndifferently, i.e., they seem to be concerned about, or involved in some way with sorcery.

There are substantial differences to be seen when the rabbi's attitudes towards magic is compared to those of the pagan operators of sorcery. Indeed, as was said above, the *source* of the rabbi's power in magical activities was verydifferent, indeed, it was the Torah that gave them the power to practise magic, and they were not involved in it by themselves.

Henceforth, it is necessary to make a brief comparison between sorceresses and rabbis. Indeed, it is possible to see how rabbis were viewed as pure and sacred figures whereas the sorceresseswere seen as demonic and negative, and whose power was judged as such[27].

[26] Geller. 2005:54.

[27]Fishbane. 1993. "Most women engage in sorcery": An analysis of sorceresses in the Babylonian Talmud" *Jewish history* 7.1:32.

In many halachic as well as haggadic traditions, one discovers that magical power did not inevitably have malevolent purposes, and sometimes it even had benevolent ones[28]. However, generally speaking, there was the idea to maintain the social barriers well divided; not to mention the necessity to keep the People of Israel well apart. Sorcery within this discourse functioned as a distinctive tool owing to the fact that it was labelled as a practice used by foreign cultures, which the Jews were usually surroundedby. Rabbis, in all likelihood, were willing to displace external potent forms of worship in favour of the established Jewish form of worship[29]. One can state that, in spite of the biblical prohibition against sorcery and its related practices, there are a huge number of texts in which one finds descriptions of rabbis intent on practicing magic, or simply being aware of its existence. Moreover, it is possible to underline that in the Scriptures there are many cases where rabbis did not protect themselves or did not use a counter spell against someone, as previously mentioned. Indeed, in the majority of those texts magic is considered as a menace that threatened rabbis and the community[30].

[28]Safrai 1987:525.
[29]Safrai 1987:529.
[30] Stratton 2005:367.

# Chapter II. Women and sorcery

## II.1. Women in rabbinic society

"One who increases women increases sorcery" (Hillel)

mAb. 2:7

The connection between women and sorcery, as well as women being sorceresses, is present in almost every society, not only in the Mediterranean *milieu*. In those societies the social role of the women was placed in a subaltern and marginal condition. Indeed, the fringe condition of women favoured their tendency to dedicate themselves to heterodox religious practices, more than men. This contact with heterodox practices, such as magic, created a union that went on from Antiquity to the Modern Age, having its peak in the well-known epoch of "witch-hunting"[31]. Certainly, it was so in the Jewish world both in its original Middle Eastern context and in the Diaspora interfaced with this theme of women and magical practices. Regarding this latter affirmation, the evidence is traceable from Biblical sources to Modern ones, both in Hebrew and Yiddish[32].

It seems significantly important to make some considerations about the society we are talking about, in order to better understand what were the alternate roles and how women behaved. The society on which we are focusing during the rabbinic period was modelled on masculine premises, and may be categorised as a patriarchal or gender segregated society owing to the fact that women were thought of as being the weaker sex. The term "patriarchal society" has to be clarified: a "patriarchal society"refers to a society in which men held and benefited from*dominant* roles in all religious, social and political spheres and levels in both public and private life. The patriarchal society considered mainly male needs, and women's necessities were considered to be less important. From a certain period on wards rabbis held authority in the society in which they lived, however, in some ways, they

[31] For a general overview regarding this topic, limited to the European continent and to the Mediterranean area, cfr. Ankarloo. 1999. *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe*, 6 vols.,London: Athlone.

[32] Brayer. 1986: 21-36; Elior 2008, esp. chap. I. [Brayer. 1986. *The Jewish Woman in Rabbinic Literature*. Hoboken, NJ: Ktav Pub. House; Elior, Rachel. 2008. *Dybbuks and Jewish Women in Social History, Mysticism and Folklore*. Jerusalem: Urim (especially chapter I)]

always had to face the *power* of women, which was primarily exercised at home. From this perspective, women were considered, in specific circumstances, as dangerous figures. Women certainly exercised their control at home owing to the fact that they were almost exclusively excluded from the public sphere[33].

Hence, at that time, women lived mainly in domestic spaces, playing essentially domestic roles. Even when womendid have a sort of economic autonomy, they never achieved full equality with men. Curiously, on the other hand, according to Hauptman, women and men were not easily in contact since there was a severe social division. Men felt easily aroused in women's presence, and dealing with them was uncommon and sporadic[34]. According to Neusner, from a sociological point of view women were conceived as anomalous, dangerous and polluted figures[35]. Furthermore, according to D. Biale women were "incapable of willed sexual restraint"[36]. Hence, one can easily understand from the above considerations why women were perceived as *other*.

While dealing with women it seems vital to look at the social boundaries, and how society was structured. On one hand, as previously stated, women mainly stayed at home being naturally apart from the rest of the male society. On the other hand, by contrast, according to Fishbane women became dangerous figures when they adopted roles that were not in line with the ideal society represented in the Talmud[37]. Hence, Fishbane hypothesises that dangerous women were the ones who became bordering figures by adopting non-standard, or even deviant, roles. One can see that the Talmud provides some examples of dangerous behaviours within the society, for example, sorcery.

In summary, there are two connected problems: 1) being a woman in the *chauvinist* rabbinic society and; 2) eventually being accused of practicing sorcery[38]. Socially speaking, as previously stated, men and women were perceived differently. Their actionswere

[33]Wegner. 1988. *Chattel or person?: the status of women in the Mishnah*. Oxford University Press, 145.
[34]Hauptman. 1998. *Rereading the Rabbis*: A Woman's Voice. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 31.
[35]Neusner. 1989. *Method and Meaning in Ancient Judaism*: Fourth Series. Vol. 4. Atlanta: University of South Florida.
[36]Biale. 1997.*Eros and the Jews: From biblical Israel to contemporary America*. Los Angeles: University of California Press,57.
[37] Fishbane.1993:28.
[38]Fishbane. 1993:28.

naturally viewed and judged in two dissimilar ways. Looking at the sources, the majority of which were written by men, we can see them as reproducing their perspectives and fears.

While making some consideration regarding women as sorceresses, starting from their subaltern condition, it is interesting to look at some quotations: “most sorcery is with women”, “most women engage in sorcery”, “the daughters of Israel offer up incense to sorcery”, “sorcery is widespread among the daughters of Israel”. There is another tradition linking particularly old women with the practices of sorcery, which is attested in (bSanh. 100b), and doubtless one should also consider all the other evidence that showed women as sorceresses more generally (such as bPes. 110a, 111a; bYom 83b; yYom 45b).

Following these materials, which are only the most evident part of a larger trend that comprehends all the diverse nuances of the relationships between the rabbinic movement and the role of the women, it appears that in many Talmudic traditions the theme of sorcery is almost inevitably connected to the theme of women as sorceresses, as will be analysed later on. However, on one hand, one has to reflect that portraits of women were not always based on historical realism. According to Safrai, the main idea is that rabbis had to deal with the *frighteningpower* of women. Female control was conceived as a threat due to the fact that it was outside male control, and occasionally it connected with the sphere of the prohibited, such as sorcery[39].

Apparently, women lived in a world apart from men, and certainly, they did not take part in combatting in battles. Women were excluded from every field where physical power and strength were required. Indeed, as previously stated, women lived in a world that was characterised, in all probability, by heterodox practices. Sorcery could be viewed, from women’s point of view, as a peculiar kind of ambition for power. Regarding women and sorceresses it is interesting to note how Bar-Ilan described both the functions of women and sorceresses with respect to men. In his description, women are called to satisfy men’s needs, and sorceresses, by contrast, are presented differently, since sorceresses made use of men[40].

[39]Safrai 1987: 532.

[40] Bar-Ilan. 1998. *Some Jewish women in antiquity*. No. 317. University of South Florida, 128.

Probably, the attitude towards women changed in the Talmudic period. During the Biblical period one could have encountered women who had a sort of power (in the case of prophetesses), but in the Talmudic period the situation was different. A possible explanation could be that at one point prophecy disappeared, and that the sages taught the oral law, which was obviously forbidden for women. Thus, in the Talmudic period women were conceived, as "women are a separate people" (b. Shab. 62a).

Peskowitz stated some different considerations on the topic, and due to their degree of dissimilarity with respect to those previously stated, it is interesting to report them in order to make a comparison. Women, according to M. Peskowitz, had a very central role in the family, in economic activities and even in Jewish rituals[41]. Additionally, according to D. Maoz, women were present in many different contexts, not only private life, but indeed, they also held places in legal, commercial and social activities[42]. The present thesis, however, focuses on the literature that views women as subordinate figures in the discourse of sorcery.

As a consequence, in this study of women and men, it seems interesting to follow the line of thinking of Baskin. This scholar believed that the (Gen. Rabb. 8:1) was of significant importance in reference to (Gen. 2:21), "And he took one of his ribs" in understanding the roles of women[43]. (Gen. 2:21) shows how women were created from the body of men, and not by God. This latter statement seems to be significant due to the fact that the consideration of women as subordinate and marginal figures is upheld throughout rabbinic literature. Indeed, rabbinic sages conceived the first human being to be a man, created in the divine image and after him a woman, created from his body. Men were shaped in the divine image and this seemed to justified male potency.

These considerations regarding women and their specific role in society are important to highlight the possible connection between marginality and sorcery; in other words between women as minor figures and sorceresses. Other considerations in which the topic of food

[41]Baskin. "Rabbinic Judaism and the Creation of Woman". Peskowitz, and Levitt. 2014. eds. *Judaism since gender*. Routledge, 125.
[42]Cohn. "Domestic Women: Constructing and Deconstructing a Gender Stereotype in the Mishnah". In Maoz and Gondos, eds. 2011. *From Antiquity to the Postmodern World: Contemporary Jewish Studies in Canada*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 38-39.
[43]Baskin. 2014:126.

will be taken into examination are those that retrace in food the first tool women (as sorceresses) could employ in magic rituals since they were segregated in domestic life.In addition, as previously stated, food is present in some rabbinic narratives which concern sorcery.

In summary, some sources of late antiquity one can find that marginal figures were involved in banned activities such as sorcery, and this can be considered as a *topos*. Doubtless, sorcery was counted outside the *mișvot*. Another consideration needs to be made, namely, rabbis were not the only ones who depicted women as sorceresses, in all probability, in order to construct gender differences. Indeed, all such prejudices and accusations were also present among gentiles who lived in the same epoch, and even in other epochs.

**II.2. Biblical background**

One of the most ancient myths in the Bible, Gen. 6:1-4, narrates the intercourse between angels and antediluvian women. Even though the fragment focuses on the transmission process of the arts and sciences from the angels to the human beings, it has been subsequently interpreted as a description of the role of the woman at the beginning of the magical arts[44]. One of the most explicit texts on the transmission of arts that we have knowledge of is 1 Enoch 6-8, and especially the part 8:3. The fragment highlights the concept that, while angels were teaching witchcraft to human beings, women were the first to be involved in those magical practices. Another tradition, to be considered analogous in this content, can be retraced in the Testament of Reuben. In this tradition women are presented as experts in practicing sorcery since they had learned it from the angels (see 5:5-6: "for every women who schemes in these ways is destined for eternal punishment for it was thus that they charmed the watchers, who were before the flood").[45]

[44]Kraeling. 1947. "The Significance and Origin of Gen. 6:1-4," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 6.4: 193-208; Van Gemeren. 1981. "The Sons of God in Genesis 6: 1.4", *Westminster Theological Journal* 43: 320–348; Melvin, D. 2011. "The Gilgamesh Traditions and the Pre-History of Genesis 6:1-4." *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 38: 23–32.
[45]Charlesworth. 2010. *The Old Testament Pseudoepigrapha*. Garden city: Hendrickson Publishers.

However, leaving aside the mythical traditions at the root of Jewish history, it is narrated in the Hebrew Bible that magical practices were banned in ancient Israel; but despite this banthey were practiced all the same. On this point (Deut. 18:10-12) speaks clearlyand says:

> Let no one be found among you who sacrifices their son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, a sorcerer, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spirits or who consults the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the LORD; because of these same detestable practices the LORD your God will drive out those nations before you.

In this verse, which claims its own "*legal value"* in every epoch,a variety of different practitioners of the occult and of magic are presented who are the same figures that were present in contemporary foreign cultures. The verse describes customs and traditions that Israelites should not imitate[46]. Regarding the operators of these prohibited practices it is worth noting that all occurrences are given in masculine form, and specifically for the sorcerer, the terms *mekhaššef* (מְכַשֵּׁף, v. 10), 'sorcerer and *ḥover ḥaver* (חֹבֵר חָבֶר, v. 11), 'joiner of charms, magical objects and knots' are employed. In other texts pertaining to the same category, in which the distinction between female and male transgression is not always observed - except in (Deut. 18:10-12) where, as we shall see, the preceding piece is integrated– it can be inferred that these sources do not intend to specifically condemn the sorcerer (male) and to spare the sorceresses (female), but only to offer a normative text of general value, in which the distinction between genders is not considered discriminating, in order to condemn the practice itself. On the other hand, magicians or sorcerers (male) are specifically mentioned in some narrative passages of the (Exod. 7:11)"The Pharaoh summoned the wise and the sorcerers (מְכַשְּׁפִים*mekhaššefim*), and they, the magicians (*ḥartummim*חַרְטֻמִּים) of Egypt also did the same by their secrets arts"); and of (Jer. 27:9) "So do not listen to your prophets, your diviners, your dreamers, your fortune-tellers, or

[46] On this passage as a catalogue of the Evil and its interpretation see, for instance, Schmidt 2002."*Canaanite Magic* vs. Israelite Religion: Deuteronomy 18 and the Taxonomy of a Taboo", in *Magic and Ritual in the Ancient World*, ed. by P.A. Mirecki and M.W. Meyer, Brill, Leiden, 242-262; Trachtenberg. 2012. *Jewish magic and superstition: A study in folk religion*. University of Pennsylvania Press. Bohak. 2008. *Ancient Jewish magic: A history*. Cambridge University Press.

your sorcerers (*kaššafim*כַּשָּׁפִים), who are saying to you, 'You shall not serve the king of Babylon'".

Of course, the number of quotations can be increased[47], but as it is clear from these reported, it does not seem possible to prove an extended condemnation of the attitude of women towards magic, as on the contraryis found in the rabbinic literature. Surely, in some passages there are explicit references to women. For instance, it is frequently recalled in (Lev. 20:27) "A men or a woman (וְאִישׁ אוֹ־אִשָּׁה) who is a medium (*'ov*אוֹב) or a necromancer (*yidde'oni*יִדְּעֹנִי) shall surely be put to death. They shall be stoned with stones; their blood shall be upon them". Certainly, this latter passage is normative in intention, and probably the clarification, "a men or a woman", only reinforces the ban of all magical activities, that are traditionally, and in the Bible itself, sometimes associated directly to the women. However, it is remarkable to specify, that here we are not dealing exactly with magic, but with a more specific activity, certainly linked to the occult world, but not exactly with magic. Indeed in (Lev 20:27) it is necromancy and necromantic divination that is prohibited. The importance of necromancy is also attested to in one of the most famous passages on occult arts of the whole Bible, the evocation wanted by king Saul of the spirit of the prophet Samuel by the *witch* of Endor (1 Sam. 28). Not by chance, the piece starts by recalling that King Saul drove out from his country all the necromancers and the soothsayers (הָאֹבוֹת וְאֶת־הַיִּדְּעֹנִים), employing the same terms present in the Leviticus. The lady of Endor is not presented generically as a sorceress, but specifically as a necromancer (*ba'alat-'ov*בַּעֲלַת־אוֹב), who was able to practice divination (root קסם) making 'rise' (עלה), namely evocating from the Sheol, the spirit of a dead.[48] It is interesting to note that in the later re-writing of Samuel's accomplishments included in the deuterocanonical Book of Sirach, the female medium from Endor is not present and Samuel's foretelling from the grave does appear as a proof of his greatness (Sirach 46:20). It may be said that the presence of the witch in that

[47]Cfr. Isa.8:19: "And when they say to you 'inquire of the mediums and the necromancers who chirp and mutter', should not a people inquire God? Should they inquire of the dead on behalf of the living?";Mal. 3:5: "Then I will draw near to you for judgment. I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, against the adulaters, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired worker in his wages, the widow and the fatherless, against those who thrust aside the sojourner, and do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts"; 2 Kings 21:6 (referred to King Menasseh): "He consigned his son to the fire, he practiced soothsaying and divination, and he consulted ghosts and familiar spirits; he did much that was displeasing to the Lord, to vex Him."

[48]Smelik. 1979. "The Witch of Endor: I Samuel 28 in Rabbinic and Christian exegesis till 800 AD." *Vigiliae christianae.*

narrative context has been deliberately erased in order to stress the positive figure of Samuel, without the distraction coming from a narrative of necromancy.

Of much more interest for the present study than the episode of the necromancer of Endor, is the very short but forceful sentence present in (Exod. 22:17) "You shall not tolerate a sorceresses" (מְכַשֵּׁפָה לֹא תְחַיֶּה), essential in the development of the association between women and sorcery. In the normative framework of the Sinai covenant, that integrates the generic prohibition of Deut. 18:10-12 previously viewed by pointing out the term *mekhaššef* female (*mekhaššefah*, מְכַשֵּׁפָה). In the entire Hebrew Bible, this is the only attestation of a comparison between the female form *mekhaššefah* and the male attestations *mekhaššef*. Without entering in the philological discussion (whether it is present or not a female form in the pre-Masoretic text of Exod. 22:17) it is possible to see, indeed, that the text used by the Greek translators of the Septuagint had to use a male form, since the term used is φάρμακος[49]. Of great interest is to try to understand what could have been the rabbinic elaboration of the verse, on which it set up essentially a great part of the later approach to the problem of the connection between women and magic, and the infliction of death penalty on the practitioners of sorcery. This type of analysis can be performed much more easily on the Talmud rather than on the Bible itself, since in the Bible, the sources are much more bare and they do not leave space, due to a lack of adequate comparisons, to a genuine in-depth analysis of the topic. As a result, the question of women and magic in biblical times remains complex: was the Bible referring to a social reality in which women were truly much more involved in sorcery rather than men, or it was the concept of sorcery that pushed back to a female meaning? Regarding the latter question, scholars considered the feminine term as a hint underlining the fact that in ancient times there was a clear preponderance of sorceressesto sorcerers[50]. Moreover, the presence of witches is specifically mentioned in a famous oracle of Ezekiel regarding the attacks against the false prophecies. The prophet

[49]Accusative masculine plural φαρμακοὺς. This ancient translation and the text seem to exclude that מְכַשֵּׁפָהis not a female form but rather a neutral form or a collective plural as the medieval grammarian Jonah ibn Janaḥ supposed (*Sefer ha-Rikmah*, ed. by D. Goldberg, Frankfurt, 1856, pp. 39, 186, 235; quoted by Bar-Ilan in http://www.biu.ac.il/JH/Parasha/eng/mishpat/baril.html). In the Targumim we find at least two different interpretations. In Targum Onkelos the statement is interpreted as referring only to women: "You shall not permit a sorceress to live" (ed. Sperber1959:126). In Targum Neophiti it is remarked that the banning was headed for both men and women: "My people, children of Israel, you shall not allow a sorcerer or a sorceress to live" (ed. Diez Merino 1970, *ad loc*.).

[50]Cassuto.1967. *A commentary on the Book of Exodus*. Magnes Press, Hebrew University.

Ezekiel described, with a great degree of realism, the mysterious practices that lacked sense (e.g., tying strips to the wrists, and covering the head with veils) performed by a sort of pseudo-soothsayer and by some "*street*" sorceresses. They invented the prophecies "in their heart" (הַמִּתְנַבְּאוֹת מִלִּבְּהֶן), and were present, probably, in a large number in the same environment of Ezekiel (Ezek. 13:17-23).

In summary, the question regarding men, women and sorcery and their degree of involvement in magical practices is very complex. It seems that the Bible did not accuse only women, but also men, of dealing in sorcery, as we have seen in the previous examples, and despite the fact that there are parts of the Bible in which the female component is stressed. Therefore, one could postulate that the post-biblical sources emphasised the female connection with sorcery. Looking at (Exod. 22:17) it is possible to see, on one hand, how in the rabbinic sources seem to prefer the interpretation that this verse, even though addressed only to the female gender, in reality is addressed to both genders, female and male. On the other hand, another type of tendency seems to take the verse literally and confirm the existence of a real and specific link between women and sorcery[51].

### II.3. Rabbinic literature

In the rabbinic literature, as presented in the preceding paragraph, the role of women in sorcery is emphasised; a good example is (bSanh. 67a):

> Our rabbis taught – "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live", this applies to both men and women. If so, why is a [female] witch stated? – Because, mostly women engage in witchcraft (bSanh. 67a).

It seems that both the Babylonian and the Palestinian Talmud commented on this biblical verse in the same manner. In both traditions, one finds the principle that "the law refers to

[51]Lesses. 2001."Exe(o)rcising Power: Women as Sorceresses, Exorcists, and Demonesses in Babylonian Jewish Society of Late Antiquity," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 69.2: 343-375; . Lesses. 2014. "'The Most Worthy of Women is a Mistress of Magic': Women as Witches and Ritual Practicioners in *1 Enoch* and Rabbinic Sources", in *Daughters of Hecate: Women and Magic in the Ancient World*, ed. by K.B. Stratton and D.S. Kalleres, Oxford U.P., 71-107.

both man and woman". (ySanh. 7.19, 25d) is a bit more specific and states: "Rather, the Torah is teaching you the ordinary way of the world, because most women are sorceresses". Henceforth, reading the sources it cannot be denied that a feminine peculiarity in practicing sorcery is affirmed[52].

The research of the present thesis starts from the Mishnah and the Mekilta, but it should be kept in mind that old traditions and sayings are also preserved in the Talmud. In the (mSanh. 7:4) dealing about (Deut. 18:10), the sorceresses are not specifically mentioned. In the Mekilta (Exod. 22:17), even though there is a specification about sorceresses, the text and its interpretation refers to both genders. Later on, in the Jerusalem as well as in the Babylonian Gemara, it appears that the rabbis were well aware of the tradition present in the Mekilta, but they conceived the statement as specifically referring to sorceresses, so that the sorcerers were not called into question. Thus, the idea that one could have is that the biblical verses, as they have been sometimes interpreted, give a clue regarding the world of women. Henceforth, women seemed to be naturally sorceresses[53].

The women in question were mostly Jewish women. Indeed, some sources specifically emphasise that the women in question were Jewish (mAb. 2:7; Soperimch. 15; yQidd. 4:11). In the Babylonian Talmud there are also two different statements that were attributed to Palestinian sages, who underlined the fact that the women devoted to sorcery were Jewish (bErub. 64b; bBer. 53a). Moreover, there are other statements by Babylonian sages which emphasise the connection between women and sorcery (bGit. 54a; bPesah. 111a; bSanh. 67b, 110b).

Not in all periods of Jewish history, Jewish women were considered especially involved in magical practices, as the biblical passages previously shown also demonstrate. As we already saw in the first chapter, the story of rabbi Shimon ben Shetah is the first mention of sorceresses in the Talmud[54]. The story is about the presumed hanging of eighty women ordered by rabbi Shimon in the first century BCE in the city of Ashkelon (yHag. 2:5, 77d). After having grouped together and hidden in a cave the women were accused of plotting

[52]Lesses 2001: 349.
[53]Lesses. 2001:351.
[54]Stein. 2014. "Framing Witches, Measure for Measure, and the Appointment of Shim'on ben Shataḥ." *Jewish Quarterly Review* 104. 3.

to destroy the world[55]. The story is unique, since it is very rare to find evidence of actions undertaken against sorceresses by rabbis, especially in this remote period. However, it is not so rare to find, here and there, the same kind of approach among Sages. "The more possessions the more care; the more women the more witchcraft; the more bondswomen the more lewdness" (m. Ab. 2:7). These words belong to Rabbi Hillel (first century CE). Also Rabbi Yosi the Galilean (first-second century CE) seemed to conceive of every Jewish woman as suspect, and close to the practice of witchcraft. The fact that women burned incense was taken to be clear evidence that they were involved in magical practices.

> Our Rabbis taught: "If one was walking outside the town and smelt an odour [of spices], if the majority of the inhabitants are idolaters he does not say a blessing, but if the majority are Israelites he does say a blessing. R Yosi says: Even if the majority are Israelites he does not say a blessing, because the daughters of Israel use incense for witchcraft (bBer. 53a).[56]

Women are here accused of donating incense to idolatrous devotions. Since after the burning of incense a benediction was said, Rabbi Yosi invites caution because the incense could be connected to witchcraft activities and, indeed, he tried to sweep any simplification focusing on the fact that those events should not be ignored. Various quotations are then attributed to R. Shimon b. Yohai in which one can glimpse the connection between women and sorcery.

> Rabbi Johanan laid down in the name of R. Shimon b. Yohai: this applies only to the earlier generations when the daughters of Israel did not freely indulge in witchcraft, but in the later generations, when the daughters of Israel freely indulge in witchcraft, one may pass them by (bErub. 64b). [57]

This passage is connected to a Halacha regarding serendipitous food finding. The discussion is about what one should do in this case, i.e., when finding food on the road should one pick it up or leave it? According to ben Yohai, it would be dangerous to pick up the food, apparently because he thought that the majority of Jewish women practiced sorcery. Since it was possible that the bread was used for some spell it was therefore

[55]Mock 2002. "Were the Rabbis Troubled by Witches?." *Zutot 2001*. Springer Netherlands, 33.

[56]Quoted in Bar-Ilan 1998:119.

[57] Quoted in Bar-Ilan 1998:120.

forbidden to collect it. On the contrary, in a comparable interpretation, in (yA. Zar. 1:9, 40a) Rabbi Abbahu expressed an opinion stating that it is dangerous to pick up the bread "because of witchcraft". This expression did not explicitly emphasise women, even though in the majority of cases women were in charge of baking bread, and thus making the implicit connection. According to Bar-Ilan it is not certain that rabbi Shimon b. Yohai expressed all those negative conceptions against women, as one has previously stated, especially since there is evidence which totally contradicts the former statement (yKidd. 4:11, 66c)[58].

> R. Shimon b. Yohaiis taught: "the best among sorcerers- split his head. The most suitable among women is a sorceress". (Neusner, Chicago and London, 1984,p. 252)[59].

As seen in many other sources, the previous examples are not isolated cases, but rather they are part of a mind-set in which women were considered sorceresses. In Sifre Deut. 11:25 *siman* 52, one reads:

> "There shall no man be able to stand against you". This refers to a single man; what about a nation, a family, or even a woman plying her witchcraft? Hence the verse says, "There shall no man be able to stand"- in any combination (Sifre Deut., transl. R. Hammer).

In Sifre Deuteronomy, three sins are enumerated: disobedience to a king, adultery and sorcery.

> A parable- a certain king issued a decree to the effect that anyone who eats unripe figs grown in the sabbatical year shall be paraded in disgrace around the arena. Now a woman from a noble family proceeded to gather such figs and ate them, and as they were parading her around the arena, she said to the king "I beg of you, my lord king let my offense be publicly proclaimed, so that the citizens would not say, she seems to have been caught in an act of adultery or witchcraft".[60]

[58] Bar-Ilan.1998:120.
[59] Quoted in Bar-Ilan. 1998:120.
[60] Quoted in Bar-Ilan. 1998:122.

# Chapter III

## Connecting women and magic through eating and drinking

### III.1. General Considerations

As has been shown in the previous chapters, in Judaism as well as in various other contexts, women had little authority in public life. It must be said, however, that in the domestic sphere and more specifically, in the domain of food preparation and kashrut, they had undeniable authority. It could be said that, the importance of the women in private life possibly balanced out the modest influence they had in the world and in all the activities from which they were naturally cut off. Indeed, women mostly controlled the preparation of food, and consequently, the family kashrut.

Kashrut regulations had to be followed precisely and very meticulously. Indeed, the observance of kashrut rules had a primary importance in affirming rabbinic Judaism[61]. From this follows that, while ancient Judaism apparently relegated women to a second-class social status[62], while also conferring a great responsibility regarding kashrut on them[63]. As shown previously, the rabbis (especially in the Tannaitic period) generally demonstrated the widespread and ancient diffidence towards women, but they also had to trust women in order to eat without any worries and concern, since women were the people responsible for acquiring and preparing foodstuff.

Without a doubt, kashrut had a social value. Within the society, kashrut functioned as a means to maintain the sharp division between Jews and gentiles. Certainly, the gentiles were considered "other" with respect to Jewish society also because of their different dietary observances. Despite the fact that this separation based on diet was not the only reason of the reciprocal social division. Kashrut implied a great deal of anxiety and restrictions about food and drinks. Anything the Jews ate or drank had to be in compliance

[61]For a general introduction to these themes, in the vast literature available see at least the wide elaboration in Greenspoon. Simkins, Shapiro.2005. Eds. Food and Judaism. Vol. 15. Creighton University Press.
[62]Fishbane. 1993:34.
[63]Murray. 2007. The Magical Female in Greaco-Roman Rabbinic Literature. *Religion and Theology* 13. 3-4:301.

with the kashrut regulations. It should be emphasised that this was the rabbinical point of view. Certainly, in many contexts of everyday life the majority of the population was not so concerned about kashrut, and did not care very much about the provenience of their food and drink, especially since poverty was a primary problem for many people. Indeed, one can say that rabbis and erudite people may have considered kashrut to be central in their lives. However, food prescription did not touch everyone due to the fact that there were many other problems that afflicted people at that time.

After these necessary preliminary considerations, the connection between food, sorcery and women can be analysed. The first obvious element to consider is related to the risk of poisoning. The knowledge of dangerous mixtures is clearly connected with the practice of sorcery. Indeed, it can be observed that if the majority of the women were accused to be sorceresses or poisoners, then very often the primary tools they could have used, in order to make their spells effective, appear to have been through food and/or drink. Henceforth, food in the framework of sorcery is viewed as a menace, i.e., as something that could bear in itself magical connotations and aspects. Without a doubt, it will be interesting to investigate if the act of drinking or the drink itself should be labelled a threat, like foodstuff in the study about sorcery.

The connection between food, drink and sorcery could also be viewed more widely by adopting, once again, a social point of view. The mechanism probably started in very old times. Leaving aside the rabbinic sources for a while, we must turn to the book of Enoch, previously considered because of its association between sorcery and the knowledge of plants and roots. As hinted by Tal Ilan, this kind of connection was widespread in ancient times, and from immemorial time men and women occupied dissimilar roles in the daily life.[64] In the earliest times, men dedicated themselves to hunting, whereas women dealt with plants.[65] The fact that women were dealing with plants is very important and opens some interesting perspectives. Probably, the importance of plants was due to the fact that women processed them into food. Hence, it seemed that women were very knowledgeable in the sphere of plants, healing practices and surely food preparation. These very useful and

[64]Ilan. 2006. *Silencing the Queen*: The Literary Histories of Shelamzion and Other Jewish Women. Vol. 115. Mohr Siebeck, 229.
[65]Ilan, T. 2006:229

vital female roles and skills since the did not vanish over the centuries and, indeed, they were carefully preserved.

A parallel between food, magical practices, as well as poisoning will be shown before analysing the rabbinic sources. Besides the evident difficulties, one will follow some of the Ilan's observations in order to find out interesting remarks concerning this specific topic. This scholar pointed out that in the Greek language the word *pharmakon* was is used to refer to medicine, sorcery as well as poison. In addition, this word also refers to herbs or drugs in general[66]. Likewise, it seemed that the general term *pharmakon* did not have a specific positive or negative connotation. In Latin, however, the root *venom* originally had the meaning of love potion, owing to the fact that it derives from Venus[67]. Subsequently, it had two meanings, poison as well as witchcraft[68]. Once again, it did not state if it bore a beneficial or damaging sense. In this context, also the Latin word *veneficium* it is sufficiently unclear and remarkable. In all probability, it could have meant either poisoning or performing sorcery. This vagueness of the terms allows one to assume that the involvement in sorcery or in poisoning had in ancient time and cultures a degree of similarity. Poisoning and magical acts, without a doubt, were conceived in both contexts very negatively, and as dangerous activities.

Furthermore, in Jewish sources one finds Josephus, in Antiquates of the Jews[69], telling a story regarding Herod. Herod was under threat of being poisoned in his own court. One has evidence that women were directly to accused; the possessor of the poison seemed to be, in all probability, a woman. Indeed, again according to Josephus, the women in Arabia were very skilled poisoners, and the poison in question was created there[70].

[66]Horstmanshoff.1999. "*Ancient medicine between hope and fear: Medicament, magic and poison in the Roman Empire*". European Review 7.01: 43.

[67]Kaufman.1932. "*Poisons and poisoning among the Romans*." Classical Philology, 156.

[68]Ilan, T. 2006: 229.

[69] Quoted in Ilan, T. 2006:230. Josephus, Antiquites of the Jews 17:62-3.

[70]Ilan, T . 2006: 230.

### III. 2. Rabbinic sources

Since its origins, the rabbinic movement aimed to hold authority and control over the Jewish society in all spheres of everyday life[71]. Even though it was extremely problematic for them to supervise the female realm since it was naturally separate. Indeed, as already stated, the world of women was largely filled with daily domestic activities in which neither rabbis nor men could be involved. As a result, those activities and the world of women in the eyes of the rabbis started to bear new *meanings*. Their world and their practices seemed suspicious and have challenged men's comprehension[72]. Occasionally, it seemed that women's actions were connected with magical practices and specifically with sorcery. It is markedly fascinating to see how rabbis portrayed the female world as a world characterised by dangers, especially in the Talmudic period[73].

Studying the correlation between sorcery, women and food is a very difficult task for several reasons. First of all, the sources that analyse and focus attention on this topic are few in number. Additionally, it is always demanding to understand if the debates - which will be presented later on - were based on historical truth or not. Certainly, many of the anecdotes give birth to a fertile and not simple discussion. The sources are important owing to the fact that through them one can enter in the core of the debate. Before looking at the sources, it is important to affirm that even in this domain rabbis frequently utilised metaphors to give the impression that they were debating about a certain specific topic, and not about something else. It should be explained that the rabbis sometimes used metaphors concerning the realm of eating in order to talk about sexual activities[74]. one should bear in mind Labovitz's study while looking at the sources. Certainly, the scope of this present work is not focused on metaphors, but rather on the presence of food and how it was employed in the magical practices.

[71]Murray. 2007:299.
[72]Murray. 2007:299.
[73]Murray. 2007:288.
[74]Labovitz. 2008. "Is Rav's Wife 'a Dish? Food and Eating Metaphors in Rabbinic Discourse of Sexuality and Gender Relations", *in Studies in Jewish Civilization, Vol. 18; Love- Ideal and Real- in the Jewish Tradition from Hebrew Bible until Modern Times*, ed. Greenspoon & Simkins Omaha: Creighton University Press, 147.

Four fragments that highlight the connection between women, food and sorcery will be analysed. Those sources have already been studied on diverse occasions[757][677]. It seems to be more practical to divide the sources uses in order to render the discourse more fluid and clear. The four fragments of the Babylonian Talmud present as common feature, i.e., the presence of sorcery, foods or drinks. Hence, in this reading of the four fragments, it is possible to infer that two of them (bPes. 110a) and (bHull. 105b) focus more on dietary observance while the other two on cooking and drinking. Those alimentary observances were made in order to ward off magical assaults. Regarding the first two fragments it is convenient to highlight – as will be seen later in details - all the implications that those dietary observances had, for example, an occasion to establish rabbis as people with preventive knowledge against the risks of sorcery. It is interesting to emphasise how the two stories have a sort of prescriptive value which clearly show what one has to avoid in order to not fall victim of sorcery. Two different individuals elucidated the prescriptive value, Abaye's foster mother (bHull. 105b) and Yosef the demon (bPes. 100a). Effortlessly, the individuals became interesting due to their different *nature:* a woman and a demon. In both episodes, food and/or drink are the objects which one should abstain from taking. Certainly, there are other nuances that render the fragments fascinating, and other elements need clarification, as shall be shown.

Regarding the other two fragments (bGitt. 45a) and (bSanh. 67a), some preliminary considerations can be formulated. Possibly, magic in those episodes seems to be *in action* in the sense of more dynamic. Indeed, the stories have a less apotropaic value when compared to the preceding one. In (bGitt. 45a) and (bSanh. 67a) there are no dietary prescriptions against magic and the prescriptive value itself seems to be absent. Lastly, in these stories the women are rarely called witches but rather with the general connotation of women[78]. Subsequently, it is possible to look at each fragment in detail in order to note important nuances.

[75]Stratton. 2005. "Imagining power: Magic, miracle, and the social context of rabbinic self-representation." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 73.2: 361-393.

[76]Seidel. 1992. " RELEASE US AND WE WILL RELEASE YOU!" RABBINIC ENCOUNTERS WITH WITCHES AND WITCHCRAFT." *The Journal of the Association of Graduates in Near Eastern Studies* 3.
[77]Murray. 2008. "Female Corporeality, Magic, and Gender in the Babylonian Talmud." *Religion and Theology* 15.3.
[78]Seidel. 1992:50.

**bPes. 110a**

The following case of study focuses on eating and drinking at the same moment (bPes. 110a). This fragment presents drinks as objects that could cause death.

אמר לי יוסף שידא בתרי קטלינן בארבעה לא קטלינן בארבעה מזקינן בתרי בין בשוגג בין במזיד בארבעה במזיד אין בשוגג לא ואי אישתלי ואיקרי ונפק מאי תקנתיה לינקוט זקפא דידיה דימיניה בידא דשמאליה וזקפא דשמאליה בידא דימיניה ונימא הכי אתון ואנא הא תלתא ואי שמיע ליה דאמר אתון ואנא הא ארבעה נימא ליה אתון ואנא הא חמשה ואי שמיע ליה דאמר אתון ואנא הא שיתא נימא ליה אתון ואנא הא שבעה הוה עובדא עד מאה וחד ופקע שידא

Rav Papa said: Yosef the demon told me that for two drinks the demons kill, but for four drinks we do not kill. For four drinks we [merely] injure. For two drinks we hurt whether [he did it] in error or deliberately. For four drinks, if it was deliberate [we injure], but if it was in error we do not. And, in the case where a man forgets [he has drunk an even number of drinks] and goes out [where he is more open to demonic attack], what can save him? He should take the thumb of his right hand in the left hand and the thumb of the left hand in the right hand and say the following: "You and I, behold we are three." And if he hears someone say to him, "you and I, behold that is four," he should say "you and I, behold we are five". And if he hears someone say "you and I, behold that is six," he should say "you and I, behold that is seven." Once it happened to go as far as one hundred and one, and the demon burst. (bPes. 110a)[79].

This story focuses on a man who had to abstain from eating and drinking at the same moment. He had to desist from doing so in order not to be harmed by magical attacks. This specific episode highlights a certain custom (not drinking and eating together) that should be followed if one did not want to be a possible victim of a sorcery assault. The specific prescriptions one had to respect in order to avoid sorcery assaults give a glimpse into the idea that not everyone in the society had this kind of preventive *knowledge.* Thus, as a result, mostly erudite Jews or rabbis could live according to those preventative rules. Clearly, knowledge of those rules was confined to *privileged* people. This latter consideration seems to be important in this study that also takes into account the social point of view. It is noteworthy for this study that in (bPes. 110a) the acts of drinking and eating are considered to be a menace. Curiously, the rabbi acquires this knowledge not from rabbinic teaching but rather from the demon, Yosef, i.e., the source of danger itself gives, in this case, the instructions

[79]Stratton. 2005:368.

on how to avoid the danger. In the same text, there is another interesting statement regarding how to deal with sorcery and with food ingredients if handled by women. It is particularly important because it bears one of the few testimonies concerning the association of women as a corporation, or sisterhood, of magical practices. This time a witch provides the preventive knowledge.

אמר אמימר אמרה לי רישתינהי דנשים כשפניות האי מאן דפגע בהו בנשים כשפניות נימא הכי חרי חמימי בדיקולא בזייא לפומייכו נשי דחרשייא קרח קרחייכי פרח פרחייכי איבדור תבלונייכי פרחא זיקא למוריקא חדתא דנקטיתו נשים כשפניות אדחנני וחננכי לא אתיתי לגו השתא דאתיתי לגו קרחנני

Amemar said: The head of the women who practice magic said to me: one who runs into one of the women who practice magic should say the following: "Hot excrement in perforated baskets into your mouths women of sorcery. May you become bald, may the wind carry off your crumbs, may your spices be scattered, may a blast of wind carry off the new saffron that you are holding, women who do magic. As long as he graced me and graced you, I did not come among you. Now that I came among you, my grace has cooled your grace has cooled".[80]

**bHull. 105b**

In the fragment, it is possible to see what Abaye learned from his *master*, his foster mother. The teachings provided by Abaye's foster mother have a formal structure. They are divided into an Apodosis and a Prodosis[81]. As suggested by Seidel, the Apodosis, "At first I thought the reason was", and the Prodosis, "But my Master told me"[82]. In other words, Abaye first gives his point of view, and then gives the teachings of his foster mother.

ואמר אביי מריש הוה אמינא האי דלא אכלי ירקא מכישא דאסר גינאה משום דמיחזי כרעבתנותא אמר לי מר משום דקשי לכשפים רב חסדא ורבה בר רב הונא הוו קאזלי בארבא אמרה להו ההיא מטרוניתא אותבן בהדייכו לא אותבוה אמרה מלתא אסרתה לארבא אמרו אינהו מילתא שריוה אמרה להו מאי איעביד לכו דלא מקנח לכו בחספא ולא קטיל לכו כינה אמנייכו ולא אכיל לכו ירקא מכישא דאסר גינאה

Abaye said: at first I believed that one does not eat vegetables from a bunch that is tied by the gardener because it appeared like gluttony. The master taught me that it is because of magical attack.

[80] Stratton 2005:368.
[81] Seidel. 1992:54.
[82] Seidel. 1992:54.

RavHisda and Rabbah bar Rav Huna were traveling on a boat. Some woman, a matron, told them to take her with them. They refused. She said a word and bound their boat. They said a word and released it. She said to them: "What can I do to you who do not wipe yourselves with a shard, and do not crush lice on yourselves, and do not eat vegetables from a bunch that was tied by the gardener" (bHull. 105b)[83].

These two episodes start with a lesson regarding a magical attack given by his foster mother, and continue with the story of RavHisda, RabbahRav Huna and a woman who wanted to join the two rabbis on the boat. The woman is labelled a *matronita,* possibly due to the fact that she was a Roman woman[84]. The fact that the woman is presumably not Jewish underlies the idea that women in general represent a threat when dealing with sorcery. The witch according to Seidel "becomes a teacher of "precaution" Torah"[85]. The character of the matron, possibly a demon and certainly a sorceress (or at least a woman well acquitted with sorcery) has a key role in the episode, since it reveals that the teaching of Abaye's master (his foster mother) about eating vegetables from a bunch of a gardener, had indeed a strong reason to be. Since magic is part of the everyday life - as the spells and the counter spells demonstrate - it is not possible to act superficially, especially in the realm of food. Once again, rabbis followed a very strict diet, giving to us a kind of awareness that they were protected from being victims of bewitched food. Moreover, it is possible to make some considerations about Abaye's story structures. Abaye, as pointed out by many scholars[8687], presented two descriptions at the same time. In other words, he made a clarification based on reality and another one, provided by his foster mother, that had a magical meaning. Those episodes, as previously stated, show how rabbis, due to their eating abstention, did not fall victim to magical attack. Also in this story, eating and magical attack are bounded together. Therefore, the meaning of it seems to be clear, there are diverse measures regarding hygienic, food and bodily functions that have to be followed in order to avoid female sorcery[88]. Regarding the hygiene instruction in (b.Sabb. 81b) the use of the toilet on the Shabbat is explained in order to avoid sorcery.

[83]Stratton.2005:362.
[84]Murray. 2008: 215.
[85]Seidel 1992: 53.
[86]Seidel. 1992:54.
[87]Stratton. 2005:365.
[88]Aubin. 2000. *Gendering magic in late antique Judaism*. Diss., 184.

**bGitt. 45a**

In (bGitt. 45a) it is possible to see that even the daughters of a rabbi were accused of sorcery. This gives a glimpse into how facile it was to make accusations regarding sorcery, regardless of social position. However, according to Seidel, the daughters of R. Nahman were considered socially acceptable owing to the fact that they represent an expression of rabbinic power[89]. In the story, one sees the rabbinic suspicion towards women dealing with food, especially in its preparatory phase.

אדם אחד (קוהלת ז) בנתיה דרב נחמן בחשן קדרא בידייהו קשיא ליה לרב עיליש כתיב מאלף מצאתי ואשה בכל אלה לא מצאתי הא איכא בנתיה דרב נחמן גרמא להו מילתא ואשתביין ואישתבאי איהו נמי בהדייהו יומא חד הוה יתיב גביה ההוא גברא דהוה ידע בלישנא דציפורי אתא עורבא וקא קרי ליה אמר ליה מאי קאמר אמר ליה עיליש ברח עיליש ברח אמר עורבא שיקרא הוא ולא סמיכנא עליה אדהכי אתא יונה וקא קריא אמר ליה מאי קאמרה א״ל עיליש ברח עיליש ברח אמר כנסת ישראל כיונה מתילא ש״מ מתרחיש לי ניסא אמר איזיל אחזי בנתיה דרב נחמן אי קיימן בהימנותייהו אהדרינהו אמר נשי כל מילי דאית להו סדרן להדדי בבית הכסא שמעינהו דקאמרן עדי גוברין ונהרדעי גוברין לימא להו לשבוייהו דלירחקינהו מהכא דלא ליתו אינשין ולישמעי וליפרקינן קם ערק אתא איהו וההוא גברא לדידיה איתרחיש ליה ניסא עבר במברא וההוא גברא אשכחוה וקטלוה כי הדרן ואתן אמר הוו קא בחשן קידרא בכשפים

The daughters of R. Nahman used to stir a cauldron with their hands when it was boiling hot. R. 'Ilish was puzzled about it. It is written [he said], *One man among a thousand have I found, but a woman among all those have I not found* (Eccl. 7:28): and here are the daughters of R. Nahman! A misfortune happened to them and they were carried away captive, and he also with them. … He then [said to himself], I will go and see the daughters of R. Nahman; if they have retained their virtue, I will bring them back. Said he to himself: Women talk over their business in the privy. He overheard them saying, These men are [our] husbands just as the Nehardeans [were] our husbands. Let us tell our captors to remove us to a distance from here, so that our husbands may not come and hear [where we are] and ransom us. R. 'Ilish then rose and fled, along with the other man. A miracle was performed for him, and he got across the river, but the other man was caught and put to death. When the daughters of R. Nahman came back, he said, They stirred the cauldron by witchcraft.

It is possible to say that the meaning of the extract is clear. A not well-known *amora* from the fourth generation R. 'Ilish (first half of IV century) observed that Rabbi Nahman's daughters were able to mix a boiling cauldron with bare hands. This extraordinary situation created a problem

[89]Seidel. 1992:51.

for the rabbi (technically, a *qashiyya*: a difficult case). In theory, this prodigious action could have happened due to rabbi's daughters virtue. This latter explanation seems not to have convinced the rabbi since, as appears in the Ecclesiastes, virtuous women are very rare. Thus, it happened, providentially, that 'Ilish, Nahman and his daughter were deported together with other people to a foreign country. In this context, R. 'Ilish tested the women, eavesdropping on them while they were in the restroom (because "women talk over their business in the privy"). As a consequence, his scepticism is validated owing to the fact that the women admitted in their talk that they had committed adultery. The outcome of the story is very severe, namely, once they returned to the homeland, R. 'Ilish did not hesitate to accuse them of being involved in sorcery. Evidently the rabbi's accusation was based on the extraordinary episode of the boiling cauldron that he had previously witnessed.

Certainly, the incorrect behaviour of R. 'Ilish finds a justification in having revealed women practicing sorcery. Even though, in this case "sorcery among kitchen" is not automatically connected with the preparation or the giving of the food or drink, but more with the general behaviour of women in the house, where, they normally carry out their functions using in comfort, making it easy to practice sorcery.

According to Tal-Ilan, the episode (bGitt. 45a) is a clear sign that women were using magic[90]. It seems that there no other explanations for this bizarre episode were proposed other than sorcery. According to Mock, the episode is an obvious act of magic confined in the only realm women had access to, i.e., the kitchen[91]. It is possible to state that this scholar clearly sees social implications - such as women relegated in the domestic life- in the previously mentioned episode. Finally, one can state that it is not possible to apply a metaphorical scheme (sex-food) at this story because it would appear arbitrary and forced due to the fact that Labovitz showed how metaphorical schemes regarding sex and food

in the rabbinic literature refer to bread, water, fish and meat, which are not mentioned in the story.[92]

[90]Ilan. Silencing the Queen: The Literary Histories of Shelamzion and Other Jewish Women. Vol. 115. Mohr Siebeck 2006:229.
[91]Mock. 2002: 39.

[92]Labovitz. 2008:154.

**bSanh. 67b**

Besides, another example will be taken into account. This time the attention is mainly focused on drink and not on food. In the episode, there is a "Rabbinic hero"[93] who had to deal with a woman who worked in an inn. According to Mock this tale is unusual compared to others[94].

ינאי איקלע להההוא אושפיזא אמר להו אשקין מיא קריבו שתיתא חזא דקא מרחשן שפוותה שדא פורתא מיניה הוו עקרבי אמר להו אנא שתאי מדידכו אתון נמי שתו מדידי אשקייה הואי חמרא רכבה סליק לשוקא אתא חברתה פשרה לה חזייה דרכיב וקאי אאיתתא בשוקא (שמות ח)

Yannai came to an inn. He said to them, "Give me a drink of water", and they offred him *shattitha.* Seeing the lips of the woman moving, he spilled a little thereof, which turned to snakes. Then he said, "As I have drunk of yours, now do you came and drink of mine." So he gave her to drink, and she was turned into an ass. He then rode upon her into the market. But her friend came and broke the charm, and so he was seen riding upon a woman in public.[95]

The episode has a deal of humour, and once again, there are some *extraordinary* happenings.[96] Yannai, while was waiting to be served a drink, in this specific case a *shattitha* (drink that was made by water as well as flour), saw the witch moving her lips. The fact that the woman moved her lips was a sign that she whispered a spell on the drink. Yannai spilled the drink because of his fear of sorcery.[97] Indeed his fear proved to be well founded since the drink suddenly turned into scorpions. Afterwards the rabbi offered a drink to the woman who previously harmed him, transforming her into a donkey.

The final scene is quite inappropriate for a rabbi since at a certain point he finds himself riding on the woman because the spell had been broken. It is interesting to point out that the scholar, Stratton, saw in this episode two elements that separate Yannai from the rest of the rabbinic community[98]. It is very curious that Yannais' name in the story is not preceded by his rabbinic title. A possible explanation, formulated by Rashi, for this lack is that Yannai is dealing with magic in the story, and so he is not labelled as a rabbi since "a scholar would not practice witchcraft". However,

[93]Seidel.1992:50.

[94]Murray. 2008:217.

[95] Murray. 2008:217.
[96]Seidel. 1992:51.
[97]Murray. 2008:217.
[98]Stratton. 2005:371.

there is evidence of a rabbi with the name Yannai that who was the son of R. Ishmael[99]. This point regarding the title is quite interesting and lead to many questions and debates. It is also possible to underline the inappropriate rabbinical behaviour of Yannai, riding on the woman in a public sphere. This story clearly presents a case in which a woman is considered a witch that practiced sorcery. The woman employs a drink in order to harm someone else. It is fascinating to see how, in this specific case, the scene took place in an inn, therefore in a public place. The relevance of the public space creates a different prospective due to the fact that the woman is not in a domestic ambient.

Therefore, a parallel could be made between (bGitt. 45a), where the daughters of rabbi Nahman performed magical acts in a domestic place, and (bSanh.67a), where the episode occurred in a public location. It is possible to retrace in these episodes some similar features, such as the presence of women as sorceresses, foods and/or drinks and obviously the magical acts, while considering the two different spaces in which the actions take place. As a consequence, it is possible to infer that rabbis had to deal with sorceresses in diverse settings, domestic and public[100]. Lastly, it is fascinating to note the humoristic aspect of the story, especially because, at first, Yannai seems to have the power to invoke a counter spell, whereas a more accurate reading of the story - the absence of rabbinic title, the ending – delegitimises the use of magic by rabbis, as noted by Stratton.[101]

[99]Murray.2008:217.
[100]Seidel. 1992:51.
[101]Stratton. 2005: 371.

**Conclusions**

In summary, the degree of female involvement in magical practices remains quite difficult to state. In light of the analysed rabbinical sources, it is possible to infer a female propensity in the practice of magic even though the biblical sources show no widespread condemnation of women. The Rabbinic sources that were studied in this work clearly reflect the mind-set of their redactor. It seems a very difficult task to read those sources and not identify oneself more with the rabbi rather than with the women. It seems that in rabbinic literature there is no space for a female voice, and consequently, any consideration regarding the world of women is difficult. The subaltern condition of women increased their contact with heterodox religious practices. Those heterodox practices, such as magic, were a constant element in the female world. Both in Jewish and non-Jewish environment and literature, women were accused more than men of being involved in magical practices. Clearly, this could be read as a cultural cliché which has been present in society since time immemorial. Society, which was based on male needs rather than female ones, clearly relegated women to a subaltern context.

Rabbis were very emblematic figures due to the fact that their attitude regarding magical practices varied. Rabbis were against sorcery and tried to avoid magical attack, but at the same time they used magic. The kind of magic they performed was different from the that performed by the sorceresses owing to the fact that the rabbi's use of magic was considered a positive act since it originated from their holiness, knowledge and authority.

Women, inevitably, appear as weak figures in the rabbinic literature. Their use of magic seems to be a call for attention, an attempt to legitimise themselves because they were held apart in a domestic sphere and did not have much space in the public sphere.

The fragments studied from the Babylonian Talmud are both very emblematic and fascinating. Those sources present a vivid portrait of magical practices. Rabbis are depicted as figures that deal with a *supernatural* danger, such as sorcery. The comparisons between women and rabbis have a great deal of humour. The reader is made to think of a virtual *battle* fought between rabbis and sorceresses. Sorcery is inevitably banished since it is considered a concrete source of danger. Rabbinic concern regarding sorcery may be seen to be an act of *warning* to the rest of the Jewish society regarding dangerous practices.

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