10. STEINSCHNEIDER’S INTERSTITIAL EXPLANATION OF MAGIC*

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Magic is a cultural phenomenon which escapes precise and easy definitions. Scholars of past centuries speak of its nature mostly by inviting comparison, while polemically or apologetically distinguishing it from other phenomena such as religion, human science, and scientific developments. Magic clearly does not possess an existence of its own. Rather, it relies on those relationships that obtain among the performers and actors of magical practices. Thus it emerges in an interstitial space where the magician is the protagonist: the magic circle, the magician’s sole preserve. The “work” of a magician always presupposes the existence of a real or imaginary audience without which the magical act cannot take place. Magic is that in-between space—an interstitial component of political and social pertinence.

The aim of my paper is to outline some of the interstitial characteristics of magic, drawing on a short text published in 1900 by Moritz Steinschneider, who was the first to understand and describe the phenomenon of those in-between spaces of human perception, alleged experience, and their results.1 I shall start by summarizing the research on Jewish magic carried out between the Enlightenment and the increasing interest in anthropology and ethnology at the end of the 19th century. Then I intend to analyze the three definitions of magic suggested by Steinschneider, namely: the maieutic function of magic between ignorance and science, the erroneous and pathological role of magic between error, prejudice and mania and, finally, its role between religious faith and distorted beliefs.

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1 “Der Aberglaube. Vortrag im Verein junger Kaufleute in Berlin,” für den Abdruck erweitert [Sammlung gemeinverständlicher wissenschaftlicher Vorträge, no. 346] [Berlin: Verlaganstalt und Druckerei A.-G. [vormals J. F. Richter], 1900], 34 pages. This text, which is an expanded version of a lecture, is being re-published below pp. 569–592. Page numbers in what follows refer to this reprint.
“Encyclopaedizing” Magic

The study of rabbinic texts on magic, superstition and healing was not the primary interest of the scholarly advocates of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*. Quite the contrary, they avoided broaching the subject, largely because they had an enlightened vision of Judaism as a rational religion. They feared that by focusing on magic, the entire Jewish tradition risked being viewed as an extension of the medieval mystical movement of Kabbalah. Nevertheless, from the second half of the nineteenth century onward, the intentional ignoring of the topic evolved quite naturally into an expression of (1) a rationalist polemic against the “obscurantist” earlier centuries, when Judaism was affected by magical beliefs, and (2) an anti-apology for the Jewish adoption of “foreign customs,” non-Jewish magical traditions and superstitious practices, mostly encompassing Kabbalah and Jewish mysticism.

A second reason for the interest in magic and superstitions that needs to be considered was the typical tendency of the new philological “science” of Judaism to collect and “encyclopaedize” every piece of literature and tradition, whether Jewish in origin or by adoption. In the “manifesto” of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* composed by the “father” of the new “science,” Leopold Zunz, the presence of magic traditions in rabbinic literature is denied, or at least their significance belittled.2 In his monumental work on liturgy of 1832 (*Die gottesdienstlichen Vorträge der Juden, historisch entwickelt*) no mention is made of the huge number of magical traditions scattered throughout liturgical texts, for example, in *siddurim*, *mahzorim* (prayer books) and their corresponding fragments.

Yet, discussions on the value of magic and superstition were, by no means, a terra completely incognita. In 1807, Johann Andreas Lebrecht Richter (1772–1844) had already published some thoughts

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