CHAPTER NINE
CHARMING CRIMINALS:
CLASSIFICATION OF MAGIC IN THE
BABYLONIAN TALMUD

Jonathan Seidel

We read in a passage in the Babylonian Talmud that in order to sit as a judge on the Sanhedrin one needs to be a person of stature, wisdom and indeed a “master of magic” (*Ba’al Keshafim*).¹ While medieval commentators may have felt that knowing “magic” was important in order to refute those who believed in it, earlier Talmudic rabbis considered it vital in order to understand praxis. It is best to go beyond a “scientific” investigation of what the Talmudic rabbis thought of “magic” and instead utilize new paradigms for looking at rabbinic constructions of biblical figures and practitioners. In this essay I intend to examine the Rabbinic typologies and definitions of magic within the Babylonian Talmud from a cultural and literary point of view. I propose to ask new questions of these texts, i.e., what function does the label “magic” serve in Rabbinic sources? If we move beyond the “magic”/“religion” dichotomy, what can the jurisprudential discourse tell us about the nature of power in this culture? What sort of magic might be permitted and

¹ BT Menahot 65a: “We don’t seat any one on the Sanhedrin unless they are wise men, men of vision, men of stature, elders, masters of magic, and knowledgeable in seventy languages.” Rabbi Isaac ben Yedaiah of Provence, in his Commentary on the Aggadot of the Talmud (MSS Escorial G.IV.3 26b-27a), claims that *keshafim* in this passage means knowledge of science and the true nature of the universe. Compare the discussion of magian practice and teaching magic in the following selection from BT Shabbat 75a: “As for magian practice: Rav and Shmuel (disagree about what it is). One believes it should be considered sorcery, the other that it should be considered blasphemy. It can be proven that it was Rav who maintained (that magic should be considered blasphemy) since R. Zutra b. Tuviah said in Rav’s name, ‘He who learns a single thing from a magician deserves the death penalty.’ Should you suppose that (*m’gushta*) refers to sorcery, scripture reads, ‘When you come into the land which the Lord your God is giving to you, you shall not learn to do (JPS: imitate) the abhorrent practices of those nations,’ meaning that you do not learn it in order to practice but in order to understand and teach. It is proven!”
who might practice it? What can the category of superstition tell us about illicit magic?

In the last decade of the last century the great Hungarian rabbi and scholar Ludwig Blau published the first cross-cultural and intra-Talmudic study of Jewish magic, *Das altjüdische Zauberwesen*. Blau’s study was not the first German monograph on the subject but it certainly has proven the most durable, for two reasons: it contains an outstanding philological investigation of the terminology of Rabbinic texts concerning magic, and it poses many excellent questions in comparative magic and ritual. Blau’s knowledge of diverse documents which illuminated Rabbinic magic was impressive. The first to apply social scientific methods and move beyond the methodology of an intellectual historian, he anticipated the work of Joshua Trachtenberg’s cultural history of Jewish folk magic and religion and Morton Smith’s various historical studies of Jewish magic.

Despite his enormous erudition and the critical questions he asked, Blau clearly adopted the Rabbinic explanation of magic ritual and practice and accepted the delineation of the subject set forth in the sources. This position was itself dependent on the biblical rhetoric found in Deuteronomy and the prophets. Rabbinic sources amplify upon the topic and condemn certain magical practice as a vestigial and superstitious remnant of earlier dominant cultures, chiefly those of the Babylonians and Egyptians as well as other “foreigners” who inhabited the land. Blau took such claims at face value. While we cannot *a priori* reject Rabbinic definition and classification of magic, we must not automatically

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3 Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition* (New York: Behrman House, 1939 [1972]).

4 The most comprehensive treatment is found in his *Jesus the Magician* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1977).

5 This attitude is recalled in a famous Rabbinic maxim: “Ten measures of magic have come into the world. Egypt received nine of these, the rest of the world but one measure” (BT Qidushin 49b).

6 Biblical writers were already designating magicians as “outsiders,” members of the hated outgroup. See Stephen Ricks’ essay in this volume. My claim is that while the terminology connotes “foreignness,” the actual behaviors are more likely deviant Israelite practices which are internally problematic.