

Defying All Categories: Witches and the Talmud

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The proliferation of witchcraft reflects two timeless and universal urges: the need to draw meaning from chaos, and the desire to control the circumstances around us.

Babylonian Talmud, Gittin 45a

Rav Nachman's daughters would stir a pot with their hands. Rav Ilish had a difficulty with a verse, as it is written: **“One human being out of a thousand I found, and a woman out of all I did not find.”** (Ecclesiastes 7:28). **What about Rav Nachman's daughters? These words caused them to be taken captive, and Rav Ilish was also taken captive with them. One day a certain man was sitting with him who knew the language of birds. A raven came and called to Rav Ilish. Rav Ilish said to the man: What is the raven saying? He said to him that it is saying: Ilish, escape; Ilish, escape. Rav Ilish said: It is a lying raven, and I do not rely on it. In the meantime, a dove came and was calling out. Rav Ilish said to the man: What is it saying? He said to him that the dove said: Ilish, escape; Ilish, escape. Ilish said: The Congregation of Israel is compared to a dove; I conclude from the dove's words that a miracle will happen for me. Rav Ilish said: I will go and I will see Rav Nachman's daughters.**

Babylonian Talmud, Gittin 45a

If they remained faithful I will return them. He said: Women tell all of their matters to each other in the bathroom. He heard them saying: These captors are our husbands, and the men of Neharde'a are our husbands. We should tell our captors to distance us from here so that our husbands should not come and hear and redeem us, and take us home. Rav Ilish arose and escaped. He and that man came to a river crossing. A miracle happened for him and he crossed the river on a ferry, and the captors found that man and killed him. When the daughters returned and they came back, he said: **They would stir the pot with witchcraft.**

Questions—The Missing Details Character Ambiguities

1. Why do we only learn one detail about these daughters related to stirring pots?
2. Do these daughters all live together?
3. Are they married? Do they have children?
4. Are they learned?
5. Why doesn't Rav Nachman react and try to offer ransom?
6. Who is Rav Ilish?
7. What is the relationship between them and this Rabbi—Ilish?
8. Who is the man who can speak to birds?

Witchcraft and Jewish Tradition

Exodus 22:18

מְכַשְׁפָּה לֹא תִתִּיחַ

You shall not tolerate a sorceress [to live].

Leviticus 20:27

וְאִישׁ אִוְ-אִשָּׁה כִּי-יְהִיֶּה בָהֶם אֹב אוֹ יִדְעֹנִי מוֹת יוּמָתוּ בְּאֶבֶן יִרְגְּמוּ אֹתָם דְּמֵיהֶם בָּם: {פ}

A man or a woman who has a ghost or a familiar spirit shall be put to death; they shall be pelted with stones—and they shall retain the bloodguilt.

Mishnah Sanhedrin 7:11

Rabbi Akiva said in the name of Rabbi Yehoshua:

[There is a case of] two people gathering cucumbers.

One who gathers is exempt and one who gathers is liable [for stoning].

The one who does [sorcery] is liable, the one that grabs the eyes is exempt.

Babylonian Talmud, Gittin 45a

- The daughters of Rav Nachman would stir a pot with their hands.
- Rav Ilish had a difficulty as it is written in Kohelet 7:28 “One human being out of a thousand I found, and a woman out of all I did not find.”
- What of the daughters of Rav Nachman? [They are human beings].

אָדָם אֶחָד מֵאֲלֶף מְצָאתִי וְאִשָּׁה בְּכָל
אֲלֶה לֹא מְצָאתִי

Kohelet 7:28 in context:

I put my mind to studying, exploring, and seeking wisdom and the reason of things, and to studying wickedness, stupidity, madness, and folly. Now, I find woman more bitter than death; she is all traps, her hands are fetters and her heart is snares. He who is pleasing to God escapes her, and he who is displeasing is caught by her. See, this is what I found, said Koheleth, item by item in my search for the reason of things. As for what I sought further but did not find, I found only one human being in a thousand, and the one I found among so many was never a woman. But, see, this I did find: God made men plain, but they have engaged in too much reasoning.

Rashi's comment on BT Gittin 45a

Rashi comments on the beginning of the story:

What detail does Rashi read into the story that informs the course of the narrative? Does Rashi think that they are sorceresses?

- *Stir the pot with their hands* – They [Rav Nachman's daughters] would hold the sides of the pot with their hands when it was boiling. And the person who was observing this would see that the heat is not bothering them, as they are tzadkaniot [righteous ones].

Gittin's Story about Rav Nachman's Daughters continues...#2

- These words caused them [the daughters] to be taken captive.
- And he [Rav Ilish] was also taken captive with them.

Gittin's Story about Rav Nachman's Daughters continues...#3

- One day a man was sitting with him who knew the language of the birds. A raven came and called to him. He [Rav Ilish] said to him [the person who could understand the language of the birds], what is the raven saying? He said the raven is saying “Ilish escape, Ilish escape.’ He [Rav Ilish] said—it is a lying raven and I do not rely on it.
- In the meanwhile, a dove came and called out to him. He [Rav Ilish] said “what is it saying?” He said to him, “It is saying escape, Ilish escape.” Rav Ilish said the congregation of Israel is like a dove. Learn from this that a miracle will occur for me [which means I will be able to escape].

Gittin's Story about Rav Nachman's Daughters continues...#4

- He [Rav Ilish] said I will go and see the daughters of Rav Nachman. If they remain in their faith I will take them back [with me].
- He [Rav Ilish also] said: women discuss any matters/issues that they have with one another in the bathroom [outhouse].

Gittin's Story about Rav Nachman's Daughters continues...#5

- He heard them saying, “these [captors] are our husbands [now] and those Nehardeans [were our] husbands. Let us say to our captors [that we want them to] distance us from here, so that our husbands will not come to redeem us [they will not find us].”
- He [Rav Ilish] rose and escaped.

Gittin's Story about Rav Nachman's Daughters continues...#6

- He [Rav Ilish] went and the man [who spoke to the birds went] with him.
- A miracle occurred [to Rav Ilish].
- He crossed the river [to safety].
- And the man [who spoke the language of the birds], they found him and killed him.

Gittin's Story about Rav Nachman's Daughters continues...#7

- When [the daughters] returned and came back, **he said** they would stir the pot with sorcery.
- **Alternative manuscript version:** When [the daughters] returned they would stir the pot with sorcery.

Question: What are the two different readings represented by these two different textual traditions?

Why Witchcraft Is on the Rise

Bianca Bosker, *The Atlantic*

- Throughout history, attempts to control women have masqueraded as crackdowns on witchcraft—in our case turning women into witches
- “It’s always been about the outsider, about the woman who doesn’t do what the church or patriarchy wants.”
- And for some people, simply self-identifying as a witch—a symbol of strong female power, especially in the face of the violent, misogynistic backlash that can greet it—is a form of activism. For many the witch is worrisome, even crazy; for those who self-identify, however, it can be freeing in its individualism.
- A witch belongs to no one—and is not defined by any one outside of themselves. Beyond Rules; beyond family; beyond community.

An Example from Salem

- The Salem episode began modestly enough. Four afflicted young girls in Salem Village accused three socially marginal women of practicing witchcraft. On their own, these numbers were not exceptional.
- Soon, however, four more villagers were accused, and several adults became afflicted.
- In three weeks, the number of afflicted accusers increased from four to ten.
- Within six weeks, the accusations quadrupled, and targeted people well outside Salem Village.

Benjamin C. Ray, Satan and Salem

Arresting a Witch
*Harper's New
Monthly Magazine*
67 (1883): 221

Howard Pyle,
illustrator



An Example from Salem cont.

- Today's visitors to Salem know that people were executed there for witchcraft in 1692. They may come away without knowing that the nineteen people convicted and executed on Gallows Hill were not in fact worshipping the devil and casting spells, and that they were later declared innocent. Because of the continuing lack of clarity about the innocence or guilt of Salem's "witches," the belief that there was witchcraft in Salem persists today.

Benjamin C. Ray, Salem and Satan

Caption: "Witchcraft in Colonial America: A Matter of Lies and Death."

Description: A generic scene of the "afflicted" girls in Salem Village accusing a woman of witchcraft.

Source: Washington Post, KidsPost section, October 31, 2001. Artist; Steve McCracken. © Washington Post.



An Example from Salem cont.

- As the reader will discover, contingencies and ambiguities abound in any historical record.
- The Salem witch trials is just one example of the challenges of writing histories of women. Reading this story from the Babylonian Talmud as a way to teach us that Rav Ilish learned the meaning of the verse from Kohelet is an example of masking the complexity of lives lived in relationship with others, especially women. If the Salem witch trials are not a “cold case” to be solved but a tragedy to be investigated in all its complexity of who, what, where, when, and how, then rabbinic narratives should also point us in similar interpretive directions.

adapted by ML from Benjamin C. Ray

Pam Grossman, *Waking the Witch* (Intro)

More than anything, the witch is a shining and shadowy symbol of female power and a force for subverting the status quo—for defying the categories. No matter what form she takes, she remains an electric source of magical agitation that we can all plug into whenever we need a high-voltage charge. She is also a vessel that contains our conflicting feelings about female power: our fear of it, our desire for it, and our hope that it can—and will—grow stronger, despite the flames that are thrown at it (and it is not even clear whether the rabbis wanted to control sorceresses). Whether the witch is depicted as villainous or valorous, she is always a figure of freedom—sometimes its loss and sometimes its gain.

Witches can be dangerous, but also divine. Witches have power on their own terms. They have agency. They create. They praise. They commune with the spiritual realm freely and free of any mediator. They metamorphose, and they make things happen. They are change agents whose primary purpose is to transform the world as it is into the world they would like it to be...the witch is the ultimate feminist icon because she is a fully rounded symbol of female oppression and liberation. She shows us how to tap into our own might and magic, despite the many who strip us of our power.

In the end, Rav Nachman's daughters return home. Once the dutiful women who stirred the pot for their husbands, they have become wives who have powers, who survive their captors, who may have made their own decision to return to their households, and who generate an aura of fear. So they are not “righteous” any longer, but have they become something better?

Peace Endures In Belfast, NYTimes 4/23

“We are different and special together”