



## Geniza Magical Documents

ORTAL-PAZ SAAR

*Utrecht University, Utrecht, Netherlands*

*E-mail: [o.p.saar@uu.nl](mailto:o.p.saar@uu.nl)*

**Abstract** The Cairo Geniza has proved to be a fascinating trove of information about all aspects of Jewish life in the medieval and early modern period, magic being one of them. Hundreds of manuscripts, in different states of conservation, testify to the interest of Jews in composing and copying magical manuals as well as producing amulets and curses and otherwise attempting to harness the supernatural in order to achieve earthly aims. This essay introduces the reader to Geniza magical texts and provides some guidelines for reading these documents.

**Keywords** Jewish magic · Amulets · Curses · Geniza

Among the hundred thousands of parchment and paper leaves making up the Cairo Geniza lie also some twenty-five hundred related to magic, astrology, divination, and alchemy.<sup>1</sup> Though their overall share is not large, these documents are highly valuable in revealing a facet of the personal lives of Jews and non-Jews in the Geniza society throughout the ages. Serious scholarly investigation of this material is, for various reasons, a phenomenon of only recent decades, and many aspects of it still await exploration.<sup>2</sup> The following

---

<sup>1</sup>A definition of the term *magic* and its problematic relationship with *religion* is beyond the scope of this essay. On this topic, see, e.g., Peter Schäfer, “Magic and Religion in Ancient Judaism,” in *Envisioning Magic: A Princeton Seminar and Symposium*, ed. Peter Schäfer and Hans G. Kippenberg (Leiden, 1997), 19–43; and Yuval Harari, “What Is a Magical Text? Methodological Reflections Aimed at Redefining Early Jewish Magic,” in *Officina magica: Essays on the Practice of Magic in Antiquity*, ed. Shaul Shaked (Leiden, 2005), 91–124, and *Jewish Magic before the Rise of Kabbalah* (Detroit, 2017), 15–203. The best introduction to magic in the Cairo Geniza is Gideon Bohak, “Towards a Catalogue of the Magical, Astrological, Divinatory and Alchemical Fragments from the Cambridge Genizah Collections,” in *“From a Sacred Source”: Genizah Studies in Honour of Professor Stefan C. Reif*, ed. Ben Outhwaite and Siam Bhayro (Leiden, 2011), 53–79.

<sup>2</sup>For the reluctance of great Geniza scholars to deal with documents related to magic, see Steven M. Wasserstrom, “The Magical Texts in the Cairo Genizah,” in *Genizah Research After Ninety Years: The Case of Judaeo-Arabic*, ed. Judah Blau and Stefan Reif (Cambridge, 1992), 160–66; and Mark R. Cohen, “Goitein, Magic, and the Geniza,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 13 (2006): 294–304. See also Gideon Bohak, “Prolegomena to the Study of the Jewish Magical Tradition,” *Currents in Biblical Research* 8 (2009): 107–50, 126–27.

essay provides a concise introduction to Geniza magical texts and suggests some guidelines for reading such documents.<sup>3</sup>

The information on practical magic contained in the Geniza can be divided into two main categories. The first consists of recipes with instructions on how to achieve specific ends (e.g., obtaining protection from the evil eye, succeeding in a court of law, or causing the downfall of an enemy). The second involves finished products such as amulets or imprecations that were manufactured on the basis of these instructions.<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, one can discern between two groups of people who employed magic. The first group consists of practitioners (or magicians), who used magical recipes in order to cater to the demands of the second group, their clients, for whom they produced amulets, potions, and other magical items. One should bear in mind, however, that this distinction is not always applicable, as sometimes individuals could employ magical recipes on their own, without resorting to a professional practitioner. The recipes were occasionally collected in booklets, some carefully arranged according to topics or even containing numbered recipes and a “table of contents.”<sup>5</sup> However, most of them were inscribed on loose leaves of paper or parchment or sometimes scribbled on the margins of other, nonmagical documents.

The magical documents uncovered in the Geniza range in date from its earliest strata, around the tenth century, to the latest, with fragments dating from the eighteen and nineteenth centuries. It should be noted, however, that most of these documents can be dated only through paleographic analysis and that only a small percentage have thus far been considered. Consequently, the majority of magical documents remain undated.

Linguistically, these documents resemble other documentary Geniza sources, meaning that they are written primarily in Judeo-Arabic and Hebrew, with occasional fragments or portions in Aramaic, Arabic, Judeo-Spanish, Judeo-Persian, Yiddish, etc. Roughly half the documents contain at least a few words in Judeo-Arabic or Hebrew, and a much smaller portion employ Aramaic or words in the Arabic alphabet. A broad survey of magical recipes uncovered in the Geniza shows that, when a recipe includes more than one

---

<sup>3</sup>I focus here on documents related to practical magic. For other types of material, see Bohak, “Towards a Catalogue.”

<sup>4</sup>In some rare instances, the two categories merge to form personalized recipes, meaning recipes into which the name of an individual (or more than one) was inserted, thus creating a type of amulet. See Ortal-Paz Saar, “Success, Protection and Grace: Three Fragments of a Personalized Magical Handbook,” *Ginzei qedem* 3 (2007): 101\*–135\*.

<sup>5</sup>Gideon Bohak, “Reconstructing Jewish Magical Recipe Books from the Cairo Genizah,” *Ginzei qedem* 1 (2005): 9–29. For an example of a booklet with numbered recipes, see Joseph Naveh and Shaul Shaked, *Amulets and Magic Bowls: Aramaic Incantations of Late Antiquity*, 3rd ed. (Jerusalem, 1998), 224–29 (Geniza 5 [T-S K1.70]).

language, we find Judeo-Arabic or, less commonly, Arabic in the recipe's instructions or title while the actual magical formulas are in Hebrew and Aramaic. Many of these bi- or trilingual recipes date back to late antiquity and were originally written entirely in Aramaic or Hebrew. As they were repeatedly copied in the medieval period, some copyists decided to translate the titles and instructions into a more familiar language, that is, Judeo-Arabic. However, they refrained from translating magical formulas, perhaps fearing that this might cause a loss of efficacy.<sup>6</sup>

Given its nature, the Geniza preserves only *written* finished products, but a magical product could also be oral (e.g., an incantation to be recited) or nontextual (e.g., an ointment to be applied to one's body). Data related to this latter type of product are often preserved among the magical recipes. In some rare cases, we are lucky to retrieve both a finished product and the recipe on which it was based, as will be exemplified by the sample text below.

Geniza magical texts were intended to achieve a wide range of goals: apotropaic, curative, divinatory, erotic, aggressive, etc. Recipes often bear a title explicitly stating their goal: for example, "For he who has a headache" (למן דחשש ראשיה),<sup>7</sup> "If you wish to know what will happen in the world" (אם בקשתה לתדע מה יהיה בעולם),<sup>8</sup> "For every evil need: to kill and to send fire and also for hate and to separate" (לכל צורך לביש להרוג ולשלוח אש וגם לשנאה וגם) (להפריד),<sup>9</sup> and the pervasive "For love" or "For hate" (לאהבה/ לשנאה).<sup>10</sup> In the case of amulets or other finished products, the goal may be easily inferred from their content. For instance, an amulet could appeal to God or various

<sup>6</sup>A reverse situation can be observed in some Jewish magical manuscripts from Europe. When recipes originate in non-Jewish sources, their instructions are written in Hebrew while the magical formulas are in Latin or some European vernacular but inscribed in the Hebrew alphabet. On the division of languages in magical and related types of Geniza documents, see Bohak, "Towards a Catalogue," 62–64, 68–70. On the transmission of such texts across the centuries, see Reimund Leicht, "Some Observations on the Diffusion of Jewish Magical Texts from Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages in Manuscripts from the Cairo Genizah and Ashkenaz," in Shaked, ed., *Officina magica*, 213–31; and Gideon Bohak, "The Jewish Magical Tradition from Late Antique Palestine to the Cairo Genizah," in *From Hellenism to Islam: Cultural and Linguistic Change in the Roman Near East*, ed. Hannah M. Cotton, Robert G. Hoyland, Jonathan J. Price, and David J. Wasserstein (Cambridge, 2009), 324–42.

<sup>7</sup>Naveh and Shaked, *Amulets and Magic Bowls*, 224–29 (Geniza 5 [T-S K1.70], p. 3, line 7).

<sup>8</sup>Peter Schäfer and Shaul Shaked, eds., in collaboration with Martin Jacobs, Reimund Leicht, Bill Rebiger, Claudia Rohrbacher-Sticker, Giuseppe Veltri, and Irina Wandrey, *Magische Texte aus der Kairoer Geniza*, 3 vols. (Tübingen, 1994–99), 3:21–29 (no. 55 [Westminster College Misc. 16], fol. 2a, lines 1–2).

<sup>9</sup>Joseph Naveh and Shaul Shaked, *Magic Spells and Formulae: Aramaic Incantations of Late Antiquity* (Jerusalem, 1993), 230–32 (Geniza 26 [T-S Misc. 10.35], recto, lines 1–2).

<sup>10</sup>For these two aims, see Ortal-Paz Saar, *Jewish Love Magic: From Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages* (Leiden, 2017).

supernatural forces requesting, “Send healing and have mercy on Bunayna daughter of Yaman” (שלח רפואה ותרחם לבנינה בנת ימן), or adjure the evil spirits, “Go out and depart and go far away and do not approach Bunayna” (תצאו ותלכו ותרחקו ולא תגעו לבנינה).<sup>11</sup>

In addition to their actual wording, magical texts can also be recognized through some external features. These are particularly useful when looking at poorly preserved fragments of which only a few words survive. These features consist of the following:

1. *Overlined, overdotted, and boxed words.* All these means of highlighting are used to denote mainly names of supernatural entities (angels, demons, the names of God) but also magical words or vowel permutations (e.g., *kwyk bkwyk* or *y'w yh hwh*).<sup>12</sup>

2. *Magical signs.* These small enigmatic scribbles resemble letters or geometric forms and often include small circles at their tips. They are sometimes referred to as *characters* (כרקטיריא), an Aramicized term based on the Greek χαρακτήρες.<sup>13</sup>

The two following recipes show the typical form and content of a Geniza magical document from the classical period. They are part of a magical handbook written on paper of which eight leaves (two bifolia) survive, each measuring approximately 14.3 × 20 centimeters. The fragment contains thirteen recipes.

## T-S K1.91, fol. 2r<sup>14</sup>

### *Transcription*

1. לחל אלמעקוד

2. יכתב עלי ורק נאר וישרב בנביד והדא אלדי

<sup>11</sup>Naveh and Shaked, *Amulets and Magic Bowls*, 237–38 (Geniza 7 [T-S K1.127], lines 3, 10–11).

<sup>12</sup>It should be noted, however, that, in nonmagical documents, overlining is employed to set out specific parts of the text, such as titles, abbreviations, scriptural citations, or Hebrew phrases included in an Arabic text.

<sup>13</sup>Possibly owing to scribal error, the term *charaktyraya* underwent changes resulting in the term *chalaktyraya* (כלקטיריא) and was then divided into two separate words: *kol ktyraya* (כל קטיריא), Aramaic for “all the knots.” See the fragment below, lines 5–6. See further Gideon Bohak, “The *Charaktêres* in Ancient and Medieval Jewish Magic,” *Acta Classica Universitatis Scientiarum Debreceniensis* 47 (2011): 25–44.

<sup>14</sup>For the publication and translation of the entire fragment as well as its joining bifolium, T-S K1.117, see Naveh and Shaked, *Magic Spells and Formulae*, 174–81 (Geniza 16 [T-S K 1.91]). The leaf containing the recipes reproduced in the text is listed as p. 3 in this edition.

3. תכתבה. <sup>15</sup><magical signs>  
 4. <magical signs> יאו יה הוה הא  
 5. מא הא אה להף אתון אתיא קדישיא וכל  
 6. קטיריא שרין וכשרין לגידא רביא דפל' בן פל'  
 7. דמשמש בין עטמתה א'א'ס'

8. למסכר פומא.  
 9. משבע אנא ואסרנא ובלימנא ומסכרנא ומטרשנא  
 10. לבהון דכל בני אנשא וחווה דלא ינזקון יתי אנא  
 11. פל' בן פל' להקיא אל המלאך הגדול שהוא ממונה  
 12. על אהבה הוא יחוס על פל' בן פל' בצאתו בבואו  
 13. בשכבו ובקומו בשם שם רב אגוקטי  
 14. טגאט פגאט דהוא אחד ושמו כתוב  
 15. אתן אץ שמו עלא אבגדהווחטיכך  
 16. למסנסעפףצקרת. תץ שמו ובשם

### Translation<sup>16</sup>

1. For releasing someone who is bound.
2. Let him write on a leaf of a pomegranate and drink in wine. This is what you should
3. write: <magical signs>
4. <magical signs> y'w y'w yh hwh h'
5. *m' h' 'h lhP* You, *holy symbols* and all
6. *the knots, loosen and make fit the big sinew of N son of N*
7. *that performs* among his bones. A(men) A(men) S(elah).

8. *For shutting the mouth.*
9. *I adjure and bind and restrain and shut and obstruct*
10. *the hearts of all sons of men and Eve (i.e., all people), so that they may not harm me, I,*
11. N son of N. Lahaki'el the great angel who is appointed
12. over love, may he have mercy on N son of N as he goes out and comes in,
13. as he lies down and he stands up. In the name of the great name 'gwqty
14. !g'! !g'! *who is one and his name is written*

<sup>15</sup>For the actual symbols used, see fig. 1 below.

<sup>16</sup>Different type styles have been employed in compiling the translation to indicate the different languages used in this handbook: Judeo-Arabic appears in Roman type, Hebrew is underlined, and Aramaic is italicized. Parentheses indicate the completion of an abbreviated text or my interpolation.



Fig. 1. T-S K1.91, fol. 2r, a fragment from a medieval handbook of magic containing recipes for various aims.

15.  $\boxed{t'n} \text{ } ^{\prime}S$  his name is  $\boxed{t'}$   $^{\prime}bgdhwz\dot{h}tykK$   
 16.  $ImMnNs \text{ } ^{\prime}p\dot{s}Sqr\dot{s}t . tS$  is his name. And in the name of [...]

### Discussion

The recipes are written in a mixture of Judeo-Arabic and Aramaic or Hebrew and Aramaic that is very common in Geniza magic. Each begins with a title stating its purpose: releasing a “bound” (probably impotent) person in the first recipe and silencing one’s enemies (lit. “shutting the mouth”) in the second. As can be seen in fig. 1, the recipes are separated from each other by a dividing line, and their titles are also set off from the rest of the text. Such formal means made it easier for people employing magical handbooks to find the recipe they needed, although not all the scribes of Geniza magical texts were as neat as the present one.

The first recipe instructs the magician or the interested party to inscribe a series of magical signs and vowel permutations on a leaf and then rinse the writing in wine. The vowel permutations are over-dotted, setting them apart from regular words, and indicating their special function in the text. So are the letters  $^{\prime}$ s, representing the abbreviated ending of typical Jewish prayers. The wine should eventually be drunk by the bound person, whose “big sinew” (meaning perhaps the sex organ) will then be able to function properly. The



signs and vowels are addressed directly and referred to as “holy symbols” and “knots” (see n. 13 above). Obviously, we have little way of knowing whether and how such a recipe was put to use since its end product would have been merely a potion.

The second recipe begins with an adjuration containing several synonym verbs, intended to cover many possible instances of silencing. The person whom the adjuration is intended to benefit is listed as *pel(oni) ben pel(omit)*, that is, “N son of N.” This generic term is very common in magical recipes as well as in nonmagical documents such as legal texts. It was supposed to be replaced by a real name, designating the person who employed the recipe in practice. Next, the text refers to the supernatural entity in whose name the magical action was to be performed. This is Lahaki’el, the “great angel” who is said to be appointed over love. Several other magical names are listed, all of them boxed, followed by a full alphabetical sequence. What makes this recipe particularly interesting is the fact that the Geniza preserves proof of its actual use by a medieval magician. T-S K1.167, published in the same volume as the magical handbook presented above, is a lengthy amulet written on behalf of a woman named Sitthum.<sup>17</sup> The scribe who prepared the amulet employed the recipe presented above (or, rather, a slightly different version thereof) as part of the amulet text. Replacing the generic *pel(oni) ben pel(omit)* with the name Sitthum bat Sitt al-Ahl, and modifying the grammatical gender in lines 12–13 from masculine to feminine, the scribe transformed a magical recipe into a finished product. That the parchment amulet shows signs of having been folded and carried on the body reveals an unhappy family life, as Sitthum wished to silence and be protected from none other than her husband, Moussi.

Despite S. D. Goitein’s determination to ignore the presence of magical items in the Geniza, the thousands of such documents preserved therein demonstrate that many Jews were producers and users of magic. The practices attested in the Geniza bear all the hallmarks of Jewish magic. They include citations from the Hebrew Bible or liturgy, distinctive Hebrew names of angels, adjurations employing the Tetragrammaton, and a remarkable adherence to the Jewish religious tradition. The latter is manifested, for example, by the fact that almost no recipe requests to perform magical practices on Sabbath. Likewise, recipes rarely call for an unorthodox use of nonkosher substances.<sup>18</sup> Naturally, one can find many points of contact between Jewish and non-Jewish magic among the Geniza documents, yet, for the most part, these texts are typical products of the Jewish magical tradition. Moreover,

<sup>17</sup>Naveh and Shaked, *Magic Spells and Formulae*, 209–12 (Geniza 19 [T-S K 1.167]). The parchment amulet measures approximately 5.5 × 29 centimeters and is inscribed on both sides.

<sup>18</sup>For traits distinguishing Jewish magic from other magical traditions, see, e.g., Saar, *Jewish Love Magic*, 231–65.

their very presence in the Ben Ezra synagogue suggests they were regarded as an ordinary part of community life.<sup>19</sup> Documents such as the magical handbook and the personalized amulet presented above provide us with an additional window into the daily, private life of the Geniza society.

**Publisher's Note** Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

**Open Access** This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license, and indicate if changes were made.

---

<sup>19</sup>See also Bohak, "Towards a Catalogue," 61–62.