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Ephraim Shoham-Steiner

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Jews and Healing at Medieval Saints' Shrines: Participation, Polemics, and Shared Cultures*

Ephraim Shoham-Steiner

Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Israel

In an anonymous Jewish anti-Christian polemical tractate from the thirteenth century we find the Hebrew formulation of what seems to be a common sneer by Christians at their Jewish neighbors: “Why do you not seek the aid of the great the way we do? (for they seek the aid of their saints).”¹ The assumption behind this question is that medieval Jews indeed refrained from visiting the shrines of Christian saints and from beseeching them to heal the sick or mediate between the human and divine realms. In this paper I wish to question this assumption and suggest the possibility that some Jews did approach the shrines of the saints and seek their assistance, especially in healing physical disabilities. Given the strong appeal of the cults of healing saints in medieval European societies, it seems likely that Jews not only were well aware of this practice and displayed a measure of curiosity toward it, but possibly participated in the rituals as well.²

* This article stems from a lecture delivered at a session organized by Fiona Griffiths and the Hagiography Society at the forty-third International Congress on Medieval Studies in Kalamazoo, Michigan in May 2008. I wish to thank Daniel Abrams, Judah Galinsky, Patrick Geary, Yuval Harari, Simcha Emmanuel, William C. Jordan, Katrin Kogman-Appel, Ora Limor, Kimberley Patton, Avraham (Rami) Reiner, Adiel Shremer, and Eli Yassif for reading earlier drafts of this article, discussing various aspects of it with me, and sharing their wise council and incisive comments.

¹ David Berger, *The Jewish-Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages: A Critical edition of Nizzahon Vetus: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1979) 210.

² On magic as an intercultural agent from antiquity through the Middle Ages, see Gideon Bohak, “Greek, Coptic, and Jewish Magic in the Cairo Genizah,” *BASP* 36 (1999) 27–44; Naomi Janowitz, *Magic in the Roman World: Pagans, Jews and Christians* (London: Routledge, 2001); Dan Levene, “. . . and by the name of Jesus . . .”: An Unpublished Magic Bowl in Jewish Aramaic,” *JSQ* 6 (1999) 283–308; Peter Schäfer, “Jewish Magic Literature in Late Antiquity and Early Middle Ages,” *JJS* 41 (1990) 75–91; Shaul Shaked, “Medieval Jewish Magic in Relation to Islam: Theoretical Attitudes

Recognition of the popular lure of these rites can be found in the writings of Jewish learned elite in the form of anti-Christian polemical literature undermining the idea of mediation and advocating a direct appeal to the Almighty.³ Nevertheless, there is very little, if any, direct positive evidence of Jews actually engaging in this activity. In this article I wish to present some new evidence that will illuminate the issue and to suggest a methodological approach by which we may find additional corroboration of this phenomenon.⁴ I will argue that one should look for traces of behavior of this kind in the writings of its possible opponents.

When I say that there is little or no “direct positive evidence,” I refer to documentation such as a church record indicating that a Jew made a donation to the shrine of a certain Christian saint after being miraculously healed or a personal Jewish document that refers clearly to such an act. The absence of statements of this kind is not surprising, however. Jews who turned to the aid of Christian saints for healing but were not ultimately cured would not have been likely to share their failed efforts with others. They would probably seek this aid covertly in the first place and attempt to hide their actions afterward. On the other side of the religious divide, Christian writers would be unlikely to speak of a Jew who was miraculously cured at a shrine unless the incident served their religious and polemical interests, for example, by resulting in a conversion. Such testimonies do exist, but they are highly suspect as records of actual events. Christian exempla recount stories of Jews who were cured from disabilities and ailments after having been involved in what modern scholarship has termed “interfaith dialogue.” These stories were designed to enhance belief in the miraculous powers of saints and often ended with the Jews’ conversion. In one such story, St. Severinus strikes a Jew dumb during a debate. The Jew is only cured after he realizes that his affliction was caused by his blindness to the Christian truth. In the end, he converts and is baptized.⁵ Another fascinating account is recorded in the Byzantine miracle tales of St. Damien. A Jewish woman visits St. Damien’s tomb in the hope of being cured of a cancerous tumor in her breast. The Saint advises the woman to eat pork. At first she refuses

and Genres,” in *Judaism and Islam: Boundaries, Communication and Interaction* (ed. Benjamin J. Hary, John L. Hayes, and Fred Astren; Leiden: Brill, 2000) 97–109; Eliot R. Wolfson, “Magic from Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages,” *The Review of Rabbinic Judaism* 4 (2001) 78–120.

³ On the nature of the Jewish anti-Christian polemics in Western Europe, see Samuel Krauss, *Jewish-Christian Controversy from the Earliest Times to 1789* (ed. and rev. William Horbury; vol. 1; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1995); Daniel Lasker, “Jewish Philosophical Polemics in Ashkenaz,” in *Contra Iudaeos: Ancient and Medieval Polemics Between Christians and Jews* (ed. Ora Limor and Guy Stroumsa; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 1996) 195–214; and recently idem, *Jewish Philosophical Polemics Against Christianity* (Oxford: Littman, 2007).

⁴ In a previous paper I discussed the challenge that the cult of saints and its strong healing potential posed to medieval Jewry and pointed out possible devices constructed within the Jewish community as a result of this challenge. Ephraim Shoham-Steiner, “‘For a prayer in that place would be most welcome’: Jews, Holy Shrines and Miracles — A New Approach,” *Viator* 37 (2006) 369–95.

⁵ James Parks, *The Conflict of the Church and the Synagogue: A Study in the Origins of Anti-Semitism* (New York: Atheneum, 1981) 296–97.

due to her adherence to the Jewish dietary laws, but she eventually follows the saint's suggestion and is not only cured but decides to convert to Christianity.⁶

Although accounts that refer directly to Jewish reliance on healing saints are scarce and of questionable reliability, much can be inferred from available indirect evidence. Research has shown that both Jewish and Christian pious circles expressed concern over what seems to have been a rather widespread phenomenon, namely the interreligious exchange of *domestic* remedies, charms, and miracle cures. Attempts to limit and discourage this exchange fit within the larger framework typical of certain pietistic trends in both religions. In the second half of the twelfth century pietists sought to minimize interreligious contact. Clear manifestations of this tendency can be found, for example, in the extensive correspondence of Pope Innocent III regarding the Jews. The final outcome of his essays on the Jews, scattered throughout his extensive writing, eventually crystallized in the form of articles relating to the Jews in the resolutions of the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215.⁷ The limitations set by this document were a reaction to the perceived coexistence of Jews and Christians and relatively free exchange of ideas between the two groups during the two preceding centuries. Such interaction existed in the form of non-Jewish employees in Jewish homes, close commercial relations, partnerships between Christians and Jews, and Jewish and non-Jewish neighborly relations, manifested in, among other contexts, the realm of domestic medical interactions and the exchange of domestic medical knowledge.⁸

⁶ André Jean Festugière, *Saint Thècle, Saints Côme et Damien, Saints Cyr et Jean (extraits), Saint George* (Paris: Picard, 1971) 100–102. I wish to thank Gabor Klaniczay of the Central European University in Budapest for referring me to this miracle tale. The story of St. Damien reflects the Christian understanding that Jews would not violate their dietary laws for medical reasons. Jews however did use “non-kosher” ingredients including lard and pork in medical recipes. Evidence of this phenomenon can be found in numerous documents in Judeo-European languages as well as in Hebrew medical remedies scattered in Jewish medieval manuscripts. See Ephraim Shoham-Steiner, “‘This should not be shown to a gentile’: Medico-Magical Texts in Medieval Franco-German Jewish Rabbinic Manuscripts,” *Journal of Early Medicine* 2 (2009) (forthcoming). On this phenomenon see Sara Larrat-Keeper and Rolf H. Bremmer’s splendid collection of essays, *Signs on the Edge: Space, Text and Margin in Medieval Manuscripts* (ed. Sara Larratt-Keefer and Rolf H. Bremmer Jr.; Peeters: Leuven, 2007).

⁷ On this correspondence and the decisions of the Fourth Lateran council of 1215, see Solomon Grayzel, *The Church and the Jews in the XIIIth Century* (2 vols.; Philadelphia: Dropsie College for Hebrew and Cognate Learning, 1933) 1:9–83. For a translation of the text of articles 67–70 in the decrees of the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, see Norman P. Tanner, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* (Original text established by Giuseppe Alberigo et al. in consultation with Hubert Jedin; 2 vols; London: Sheed & Ward, 1990).

⁸ For a survey of the vast network of Jewish-Christian relations in medieval Europe, see Jonathan M. Elukin, *Living Together, Living Apart: Rethinking Jewish-Christian Relations in the Middle Ages* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007). An example of this tight commercial connection can be found in Haym Soloveitchik, *Principles and Pressures: Jewish Trade in Gentile Wine in the Middle Ages* (Tel Aviv: `Alma, 2003) (Hebrew). In this book the author discusses the internal changes in Jewish ethical, religious, and legal reactions to the traditional approach to dealing with gentile wine in the Franco-German Jewish realm. The wine industry and trade as well

This last area of interaction is portrayed in two narrative exempla that seek to limit domestic medical exchanges, thereby testifying to their existence. The stories come from works which reflect the views of pietistic elements in each society in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. The first exemplum comes from a Jewish religious ethical work known as the *Book of the Pious* (*Sefer Hasidim*);⁹ the other comes from a Christian monastic exempla collection. For devout Jews like Rabbi Judah the Pious of Regensburg (d. 1217), the co-author and editor of the *Book of the Pious*,¹⁰ such exchanges were especially objectionable when the methods of healing involved the use of ritually impure ingredients or typically non-Jewish (pagan or Christian) folk remedies. For their part, pious Christians objected to Jewish use of the healing powers of Christian saints.

The account in *Sefer Hasidim* appears among other ethical rulings that express pietistic ideas about the relationship between Jews and the surrounding Christian society. In this story, the author praises a Jewish mother for rejecting her Christian neighbor's offer to use a stone chip relic from no less than the ultimate Christian shrine — the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.

as the wine-crediting business became important elements in the regional economy and involved both Jews and non-Jews.

⁹ This extraordinary source of information on Jewish culture in the medieval Franco-German world has survived in a few manuscripts. The most extensive of these is ms Parma Palatina Heb. 3280. This manuscript was forgotten after the Middle Ages. In 1891 it was discovered, copied, and published by Jehuda Wistinezki in Berlin. A later printing of Wistinezki's edition came out in Frankfurt am Main in 1924 with a long introduction by Jacob Freimann. Another, shorter, version of *Sefer Hasidim* survives only in an early printing from Bologna (1538). Unlike the Parma ms version, this version became rather popular and was reprinted many times after 1538. The most recent edition based on the Bologna printing was edited by Rabbi Reuven Margaliyot and published in Jerusalem in 1957. Three contemporary scholars — Alfred Haverkamp (Trier University), Peter Schäfer (Princeton University), and Israel J. Yuval (Hebrew University) — are currently leading a team of researchers (Saskia Dönitz, Avraham [Rami] Reiner, René Richtscheid, and others) working on a new edition of *Sefer Hasidim* entitled *Juden und Christen im „Buch der Frommen“ (Sefer Hasidim). Edition, Übersetzung und Kommentierung ausgewählter Texte zur Geschichte der Juden und der jüdisch-christlichen Beziehungen im mittelalterlichen Deutschland*. The team's preliminary findings were published in Peter Schäfer's "Jews and Christians in the High Middle Ages: The Book of the Pious," in *The Jews in Europe in the Middle Ages (Tenth to Fourteenth Centuries): Proceedings of the International Symposium held at Speyer, 20–25 October, 2002* (ed. Christoph Cluse; Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2004) 29–42. Another important contribution by Peter Schäfer and Michael Meerson to our knowledge and research of *Sefer Hasidim* is the recent uploading of the PUSHD-The Princeton University *Sefer Hasidim* Database onto the World Wide Web: https://etc.princeton.edu/sefer_hasidim/index.php. Our story appears in the Parma ms (Wistinezki edition) § 1552.

¹⁰ Rabbi Yehuda himself was apparently a revered Jewish holy man during his lifetime and probably even more so posthumously. See *She'elot U'Teshuvot MaHaRIL* § 118 (ed. Yitzchok Satz; Jerusalem: Mekhon Yerushalayim, 1980) 214 [Hebrew]. Many hagiographical accounts mention Rabbi Yehuda as well as his father, Rabbi Shmuel b. Kalonymus "the Pious" of Speyer, as saintly figures. One of the largest collections of these hagiographical accounts is the Judeo-German (Yiddish) *Ma'aseh Buch*. This collection probably circulated orally in both Hebrew and Yiddish for some time before it was recorded in writing and eventually printed in Basel in 1602. A fine though somewhat archaic English translation of some of the tales can be found in Moses Gaster, *Ma'aseh Book: Book of the Jewish Tales and Legends* (2 vols.; Philadelphia: JPS, 1934).

The Christian neighbor presented the stone chip relic in order to help the Jewish woman's dying son, asserting that it had worked miracles in the past. From the Hebrew phrasing, it is clear that the Jewish woman refused because of the obviously Christian basis of the relic's healing power. The story casts the woman's reserve as a particularly impressive sign of piety by implying that her son may have died due to a lack of miraculous assistance attained outside the parameters of Jewish practice. *Sefer Hasidim* praises the mother in the conclusion to the story. This exemplum demonstrates that Jews, especially in dire need, did indeed consider employing Christian relics in domestic medical care or exploring non-Jewish methods of faith healing.

The second exemplum comes from England and was quoted in the late nineteenth century by Joseph Jacobs.¹¹ Although similar to the German-Jewish story, it describes the dilemma from a pious Christian point of view. A Jewess asks her friendly Christian neighbor, one Godeliva of Canterbury, to stop by her inn (*hospitium*) upon returning from the shrine of St. Thomas Beckett. Godeliva is described as "being skilled in charms and incantations" and the story mentions that she "was accustomed to charm the weak foot of the Jewess." In this instance, Godeliva obtains a bucket of holy water at the saint's shrine, which the Jewess wants her to use to heal her sore leg. No sooner does Godeliva cross the threshold of the Jewish home than the saint, angered by the sacrilegious intent to use his healing water on a nonbeliever, miraculously causes the bucket to break. The vessel splits in three, evoking a Trinitarian image, and all the water spills out, preventing either woman from using it. The story goes on to state that Godeliva "learned the wicked intuitions of her own mind and, understanding that she had committed a fault, she returned no more to that Jewess."

The very opposition expressed in these sources reflects a reality in which Jews and Christians exchanged domestic medical cures as well as aspects of their respective cultures.¹² Not surprisingly, all the characters in both stories are women. We are dealing here with the domestic side of medieval life, which was

¹¹ Joseph Jacobs, *The Jews of Angevin England: Documents and Records from Latin and Hebrew Sources* (London: Nutt, 1893) 153.

¹² Similar objections by religious authorities to the use of medical knowledge deriving from Jews can be found in the Latin East. See Benjamin Z. Kedar, "Jews and Samaritans in the Crusading Kingdom of Jerusalem," *Tarbiz* 53 (1984) 387–408 (Hebrew), esp. 404. Kedar refers to the ruling of the Latin church council of Nicosia that objected to the use of medical assistance by Jewish and Muslim physicians. The reason for the ruling was that Jews and Muslims abstained from consulting Christian physicians and viewed it as a violation of their respective religious codes (Philippe Labbé and Gabriel Cossart, *Sacrosancta Concilia*, vol. 11/2 [Paris, 1621] col. 2379BC). Kedar dates these articles to the mid-thirteenth century and states that they originated in decrees made earlier by Latin Church authorities in the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem in the Holy Land. The Christian preference for Jewish and Muslim medical practitioners, especially in the Latin Outremer, is corroborated by the testimony of William of Tyre, ca. 1180, which states that the Frankish princes look down upon Christian physicians and prefer to consult with Jews and Muslims in matters of health (Guillelmus Tyrensis, *Historia* 18.34 in *Recueil des Historiens des Croisades. Historiens occidentaux* (Paris: Beugnot, 1841–1843) 1:879.

typically considered by medieval male authors to be a women's realm. Clearly, such exchanges took place at all levels of society and among both genders. They may indeed have been more common among women than men, but it is also possible that the focus on women in these stories is simply due to the male perspective of the authors.¹³

There is a substantial difference between the claim expressed above and the notion that Jews actually sought the aid of Christian healing shrines in full public view. Entering a Christian shrine for the purpose of approaching the tomb or reliquary of a saint is obviously more problematic from a Jewish perspective than using a domestic cure given by a neighbor. Thus, what evidence there is of Jews turning to the aid of saints at shrines comes from those who condemned such behavior rather than those who actually practiced it.¹⁴

This kind of evidence should be utilized with great care, for critiques of particular modes of religious behavior do not necessarily indicate that such behavior actually took place. We must bear in mind that, in many cases, such critiques were used as didactic devices by those who wished to shape their audiences' mentality via *argumentum ad absurdum*. However, careful analysis of such evidence with special attention to credible details may serve as a tool for reconstructing a behavioral mode within a social group.

■ The Text's Background

To illustrate this point, let us examine the text of an exemplum that presents an argument against faith healing at the shrines of Christian saints. The text appears

¹³ A late-thirteenth-century *responsum* by Rabbi Haim Paltiel of Magdeburg refers to the possible confessional error inherent in the Jewish folk practice of praying at the gravesites of deceased rabbis or martyred Jews. R. Haim states that mistaking the dead for divine intermediaries is more likely to occur among those "who don't fully understand the issues." This may be a reference to the "uneducated masses" or to women. Rabbi Haim's *responsa* appears in the Lemberg edition of the *responsa* collection of Rabbi Meir of Rothenburg, §164. A similar opinion is voiced in *Sefer Hasidim* (Wistinetzki edition) § § 669–70. It should be noted, however, that Jewish dignitaries and sages of Franco-German descent testify that they themselves went to pray at the graves of the righteous. In *The Testament of Judah Asheri* (the son of Rabbi Asher Ben Yechiel [*Ha'RoSH*], who emigrated from Germany to Spain in the early fourteenth century) Judah writes the following: ". . . Likewise my desire for children was not due to my love for them or my expectation of pride in them, my desire was to obey the divine precept and to raise up an offspring to fill my father's place in study and righteousness. For this I often prayed at the graves of the perfect and upright. God in his mercy gave me five sons and I considered myself through them as a live man among my people and brethren. . . ." See Israel Abrahams, *Hebrew Ethical Wills* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1926) 2:168.

¹⁴ We do find evidence of Jews entering churches, although the exempla stories recounting such encounters usually describe them doing so in disguise. One such story tells of a Jew who attempts to steal a host from a church and is miraculously stopped (*Das Viaticum Narrationum des Hermannus Bononiensis* [ed. Alfons Hilka; vol. 3 of *Beiträge zur lateinische Erzählungsliteratur des Mittelalters*; Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1935] no. 72, 100–101). On this matter see Miri Rubin, "Imagining the Jew: The Late Medieval Eucharistic Discourse," in *In and Out of the Ghetto: Jewish-Gentile Relations in Late Medieval and Early Modern Germany* (ed. R. Po-Chia-Hsia and Hartmut Lehmann; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 182–83.

in MS Vatican *Biblioteca Apostolica* Heb. 285, a collection of many works bound together in one codex.¹⁵ This specific homiletic collection on the Decalogue was recently analyzed by Anat Shapira in a comprehensive study.¹⁶ The text is constructed as a series of exempla arranged according to the order of the Decalogue, each with a concluding moral statement to underscore the importance of following the commandment to which it corresponds.

The tale that most concerns us appears as the second story in the second cycle dedicated to the second commandment: “Thou shalt have no other gods before me” (Exod 20:2). The first story in this cycle also deals with idol worship, though not in its pure biblical form. Its subject is, rather, demonology and the potential for gaining wealth through use of demonic powers. The complete homiletic cycle of the *Midrash on the Decalogue* was probably constructed before the high Middle Ages.¹⁷ It was relatively popular and appears in several medieval manuscripts, though the texts are not identical and the stories do not always appear in precisely the same order.¹⁸ In addition to MS Vatican Heb. 285, the midrash can be found in several other medieval Franco-German manuscripts, among them a complete version of the work found in MS Paris BN Heb. 716, which served as the proof text in Shapira’s edition. As we shall see in our story, some of its main themes resonate

¹⁵ This is a fine example of the eclectic nature of fourteenth-century medieval Hebrew manuscripts. Not only is it written in many different scribal hands, but paleographical analysis has shown that it contains a wide array of sources. Some of the manuscript’s files and dossiers are penned in a style typical of Jewish Byzantine manuscripts, while parts of it are written by scribes adhering to the Jewish thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Franco-German style. It is not the paleography alone that shows diversity. The nature and content of the assembled works is also immensely varied. It contains Jewish exegetical commentaries on sections of the Hebrew Bible, tractates of medieval scientific knowledge in Hebrew, German Jewish ethical works, Jewish legal works, Hebrew homiletics, and a collection of exempla. The exempla collection belongs to the Franco-German portion of the manuscript and consists of almost two dozen tales. These tales are medieval Hebrew adaptations of older stories, some of which appear in earlier Jewish sources such as the Talmud. The entire cycle of stories is known as *midrash aseret ha-dibrot* (Homily on the Decalogue) and has been the subject of scholarly analysis since the nineteenth-century *Wissenschaft des Judentums* movement. See Adolph Jellinek, *Bet ha’Midrasch. Kleiner Midraschim und vermischter Abhandlungen aus der älteren Jüdischen Literatur* (Jerusalem: Wahrman, 1967) 1:62–90. Jellinek originally published this collection in 1853 in Leipzig. Our story appears on page 71. Jellinek’s version of the story is slightly different from the version in MS Vatican Heb. 285.

¹⁶ *Midrash Aseret Ha-Dibrot: A Midrash on the Ten Commandments Text, Sources and Interpretation* (ed. Anat Shapira; Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 2005). Another recent thorough analysis of the text from a different point of view can be found in Eli Yassif’s monumental study of Hebrew folktales. (Eli Yassif, *The Hebrew Folktale: History, Genre, Meaning* [Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1994] 380–99 [Hebrew]; trans. Jacqueline S. Teitelbaum [Bloomington, Ind.: Bloomington University Press, 1999] 351–70)

¹⁷ Shapira reinforces Jellinek’s assumption that the midrash was composed no earlier than the tenth century.

¹⁸ On this matter see the work of Myron B. Lerner, who has written extensively on the *Midrash on the Decalogue*. Among his works are “Liquotei Ma’asiyyot,” *Quiryat Sefer* 61 (1986–1987) 869–91 (Hebrew) and idem, “Al ha-midrashim le-aseret ha-dibrot,” *Mehkerei Talmud* (ed. Yaakov Sussman and David Rosenthal; Magnes: Jerusalem 1990) 1:217–36 (Hebrew).

with specific concepts that were common in Franco-German Jewish anti-Christian polemical literature of the thirteenth century, indicating that although it may have emerged from an earlier version of the text, the story as we find it in ms Vatican Heb. 285 was probably shaped to address contemporary audiences.

■ The Text

I begin with a presentation of the main tale from the Vatican manuscript:¹⁹

There was a certain lame (חינר) Jew who heard a rumor that in a certain idolatrous shrine somewhere lame people were being cured.

That Jew said to himself: “I shall go there, for I might be cured.”

He went there and spent the night in the shrine with the rest of the cripples that were assembled there. In the middle of the night, when they all were asleep, the Jew lay awake. Suddenly he saw a demon creeping out of the wall, holding a vessel of oil.²⁰ The demon anointed all the sick people assembled there with the oil from the vessel — all but the Jew.

The Jew turned to the demon and asked him: “Why have you not anointed me with the oil?”

The demon replied: “Are you not a Jew? Since when do Jews go to an idolatrous shrine? Do you not know that these idolatries are false? I do this,” said the demon, “for I want to deceive these gentiles in order to cause them to continue to err and thus cause them to lose their share in the world to come. You, however, should deter yourself (לקיין) from idolatry and instead you should stand and pray directly to the Almighty, the Holy One Blessed Be He, so that He will cure you.”

“Know now,” added the demon, “that tomorrow was the designated date for your cure and because you have transgressed and did this (שעשית זאת), you will never find a cure.”

¹⁹ My translation. The Hebrew reads as follows:

מעשה ביהודי אחד חינר ששמע אומר שהיה עבודה זרה במקום אחד שכל חינר שהיה הולך לשם-מתרפא. אמר אותו יהודי: “אלך שם אולי אתרפא.” הלך לשם ולן שם לילה אחת עם שאר בעלי מומין. והיה בחצי הלילה שהיו כולם ישנים אותו יהודי ער. וראה שיד אחת יצאה מן הכותל ובידו פך של שמן והיה סך את החולים, והניח את היהודי. אמר לו היהודי: “ואתה מפני מה לא סכת?” אמר לו: “וכי לא יהודי אתה? למה באת בכאן? וכי יהודי הולך לעבודה זרה? אין אתה יודע שעז אין בה שממ? אלא כך אני מטעה אותם כדי שיחזקו בטעותם ולא יהיה להם חלק לעולם הבא. אבל אתה חייב לקיין בעז ולעמוד ולהתפלל לפני הקדוש ברוך הוא שירפאך. תדע שלמחר היה זמנך להתרפא ובעבור שעשית זאת לא תמצא רפואה לעולם” ולכך יבטח אדם בקדוש ברוך הוא שהוא חי וקיים.

²⁰ In the version recounted in Shapira’s study of the story the demon is replaced by a man.

That is why a man should put his faith in the Holy One Blessed Be He, for He is a living and existing God.²¹

As noted above, this story was the exemplum selected by the compiler of MS Vatican to highlight the commandment requiring Jews to refrain from worshipping other gods. The story opens with a rumor that reaches the Jewish lame man about the powers of a specific shrine and its saint who specializes in healing the lame. From the Hebrew phrasing, it is clear that the Jew has doubts as to whether he will indeed be healed at the shrine, yet it seems that since no other remedies have been successful, he goes anyway. This point, mentioned almost in passing, is of pivotal importance. It seems that because he lives on the margin of society and suffers from a debilitating condition, the lame Jew feels that he has little to lose. Sociologists have observed that individuals who suffer from a handicap tend to view their lives and social encounters through the prism of their disability.²² At times this viewpoint may cause some disabled people to think that society is unaware and unappreciative of their condition and their difficulties. They therefore view their situation as a license to transgress social and religious norms.

The author's decision to make his point using a liminal situation as the crux of his moral teaching seems to reflect an actual social conflict that transpired within medieval European Jewish communities. The story does not describe how the Jew arrived at the shrine and how he managed to enter, but it is likely that he gained entrance by virtue of his disability. Like the other cripples assembled at the shrine, the Jew spends the night near the tomb of the saint in the hope that he will gain some relief from his ailment.

This practice of spending the night at a healing shrine is typical of the pagan pre-Christian world and continued at some shrines into the Christian era.²³ In the Greco-Roman cult of Asclepios (Greek) or Aesculapius (Latin), individuals who

²¹ The author, compiler, or copyist's decision to end the tale with an affirmation that the Jewish God is a "living and existing God" is highly polemical. Jews in the Franco-German sphere referred time and again to the "dead" Christian deity manifested in the figure of Jesus nailed to the cross, contrasting him with the living, eternal Jewish God. An illustration of this can be found in yet another Jewish exemplum recounted by the Jewish mid-thirteenth-century Viennese sage Yitzchak ben Moshe (nicknamed "Or Zarua" after his popular halakhic compendium). In the final entry dealing with the details of the Jewish New Year, Or Zarua quotes the famous tale of the martyrdom of Rabbi Amnon of Mainz. For this text and a close analysis of it, see Ivan G. Marcus, "A Pious Community in Doubt: Jewish Martyrdom among Northern European Jewry and the Story of Rabbi Amnon of Mainz," in *Essays in Hebrew Literature in Honor of Avraham Holtz* (ed. Tseviyah Ben-Yosef Ginor; New York: Bet ha-midrash le-Rabanim be-Amerika, 2003) 21–46.

²² John J. Macionis, *Sociology* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1995) 9.

²³ Owsei Temkin, *Hippocrates in a World of Pagans and Christians* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991) 80. On Pagan and Christian incubation, see Ludwig Deubner, *De Incubatione Capita Quattuor* (Leipzig: Teubneri, 1900); Claudine Dauphin, "From Apollo and Asclepius to Christ: Pilgrimage and Healing at the Temple and Episcopal Basilica of Dor," *Liber Annus* 49 (1999) 397–430, esp. 419–24. On Jewish incubation dreams in talmudic culture, see Haim Weiss, "'Twenty Four Dream Interpreters were in Jerusalem . . .'" On Dream Interpreters and Interpretation in the Talmudic Dream Tractate," *Jewish Studies* 44 (2007) 37–77.

sought the aid of the deity were asked, as in our tale, to spend the night at his shrine. This process of healing is known as incubation. The patient would stay in a dormitory and during the night he or she would be visited by the god in a dream. A priest would then interpret the dream and prescribe a remedy or offer advice based on the interpretation.

In this story, the Jew has a vision while awake at night by the tomb, which I conjecture might be a product of his inner turmoil or guilt.²⁴ In the vision, the Jew sees a demon. This may be a rhetorical device designed to underscore the moral of the story: the very encounter between Jews and shrines should, in the narrator's view, be seen as a meeting with potent but harmful supernatural beings.²⁵ The use of oil by the demon adds an element of verisimilitude. Holy oil is a well-known feature of medieval healing practices and was an agent of miraculous cures in both Eastern and Western Christianity.²⁶ Its appearance in this narrative seems designed to evoke a sense of the authentic experience of visiting a shrine.

²⁴ Another alternative for understanding the lame Jew's insomnia is that this is the first encounter with supernatural elements in the story. Eli Yassif describes the supernatural aspects of Hebrew folktales as a form of sign language, an indication that readers or listeners should pay special attention in anticipation of the story's main argument. See Yassif, *The Hebrew Folklore*, 144–66, 351–70 for this and other functions of magical and demonological elements in Hebrew folklore.

²⁵ As noted above, in a different version of the story used by Anat Shapira, the Jew is met by a man rather than a demon, who administers the oil cure at the shrine. The difference between the versions should perhaps be explained as a polemical touch. The appearance of a man rather than a demon suggests that there was no actual miracle taking place but rather that the healing, attributed by Christians to divine power, was in fact all machinated by the priests of the shrine.

²⁶ In 1175 Burchard of Strasbourg (*Burchardus Argentoratensis*) traveled to the Outremer as Emperor Fredrick Barbarosa's special envoy. In his account he reports on a prodigy he witnessed at the site of the Greek Orthodox monastery of Saidnaiya (Syriac for "Our Lady") in the outskirts of Damascus. "On this panel a likeness of the Blessed Virgin had once been painted, but now, wondrous to relate, a picture on wood has become incarnate, and oil, smelling sweeter than balsam, unceasingly flows from it. By which oil many Christians Saracens and Jews are often cured of ailment . . ." See Bernard Hamilton, "Our Lady of Saidnaiya: An Orthodox Shrine Revered by Muslims and Knights Templar at the Time of the Crusades," in *The Holy Land, Holy Lands and Christian History: Papers Read at the 1998 Summer Meeting and the 1999 Winter Meeting of The Ecclesiastical History Society* (ed. Robert. N. Swanson; Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell, 2000) 206–14. A vivid depiction of how oil was used in faith healing at the European shrines of saints can be found in the fifteenth-century stained glass windows of the York Minster, which houses a large collection of such windows. Some of these windows highlight the life and miracles of St. William Fitzherbert, the local archbishop from 1143–1154 and the city of York's patron saint. His tomb was located in the nave of the Minster and later shrines in the choir were among the outstanding architectural elements in the medieval building, but these, unfortunately, have not survived. The most important surviving monument of this cult is the 78-foot high stained glass window in the choir, painted ca. 1414 and funded by the Yorkshire Ros Barony. One panel (#16a) depicts cripples collecting healing oil from the tomb of St. William. See Thomas French, *York Minster: The St. William Window* (*Corpus Vitraearum Medii Aevi*: Great Britain Summary Catalogue 5; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). Although it dates to the fifteenth century, this artistic representation reflects a practice common in the York Minster from the thirteenth century, when the cult of St. William became well known. The practices at St. William's shrine were in no way unique. Similar scenes appear in shrines all over Western Christendom. It is apparent that Jews such as our author not only knew that such shrines existed but

After the demon finishes anointing all the pilgrims asleep by the tomb, the Jewish protagonist, who has remained awake, observes that he has been overlooked. Disappointed by this turn of events, the Jew approaches the demon and demands an explanation. Here, the narrative's moral reckoning with those who seek the healing aid of saints begins. The demon reveals his knowledge of the Jew's true identity and bluntly asks him to explain his presence in the shrine. The demon states in an unequivocal manner that the shrines of saints are considered idolatry. His statement takes the form of a rhetorical question, a sign that it is intended for the edification of readers or listeners.

During the high Middle Ages, the concept that worshiping or admiring saints is as much idolatry as Christian devotion to the image of Jesus was apparently contested by or at least unclear to some Jews. Evidence of such ambiguity and the rabbinic attempt to overcome it can be found in *responsa* by Rabbi Meir of Rothenburg regarding oaths that invoke the names of saints.²⁷ This same ambiguity may have motivated the author of the present narrative to make a clear statement on the matter, which he placed in the mouth of the demon. Christian saints are representatives of idolatrous beliefs, says the demon, and Jews should not be present at their shrines seeking their mediation to the divine. Coming from a heavenly being — even a sinister one like a demon — gives this statement the force to eliminate any moral uncertainty in the hearts and minds of the audience.

The demon's next remark is no less important, although it is somewhat confusing. He questions the reality of the saintly presence at the shrine and the miracles that saints allegedly perform. "Do you not know that these idolatries are false?" he sneers. This last statement threatens to cast the entire scene into the realm of absurdity, for if the cult of the saints is indeed "false," what is the demon doing at the shrine healing cripples? The demon then provides an explanation: "I do this . . . for I want to deceive these gentiles in order for them to further err, thus causing them to lose their share in the world to come."

This last remark clarifies the demon's role: he is an envoy of Satan whose prime function is to cause all people, Jewish and gentile, to believe in the healing powers of the shrine of the saint. Belief in these powers is misleading, however, for they only promise physical healing of the body, not true, spiritual health. The

were acquainted (if not quite intimately) with the practices that took place there, including visits by the disabled and the use of healing oil.

²⁷ This response outlines Rabbi Meir's and other rabbis' concerns regarding Jews who encouraged Christians to swear oaths for commercial and monetary purposes and had them invoke the names of Christian saints. The same *responsum* mentions Jews who, in order to convince these same non-Jewish business partners of their solemn intentions, swore similar oaths, again invoking the names of Christian saints. Rabbi Meir writes that he has reprimanded his flock on this matter, but that his instruction was largely unheeded. See Rabbi Meir Ben Baruch of Rothenburg, *Responsa, Rulings and Customs: Collected, Annotated and Arranged in the Order of the Shulchan Arukh* (ed. Yitshak Ze'ev Kahana; Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kuk, 1960) 2:52–53 §57 (Hebrew).

ultimate heavenly reward comes to those who are not fooled by the saints' power to heal the flesh.

In Jellinek's version of the *Midrash on the Decalogue*, this notion appears in a preliminary discussion that is absent from the version in MS Vatican Heb. 285. The absent portion contains a reference to a passage from the Babylonian Talmud, tractate *Avodah Zarah*, which is dedicated entirely to encounters between Jews and non-Jews and to issues of Jews confronted by idol worship. The quotation is from what seems to be an interfaith discussion between the second-century C.E. Palestinian sage, Rabbi Akiba, and a man identified by his Greek name, Zenon.²⁸ Zenon asks R. Akiba how he explains the fact that individuals seeking the healing power of idols (probably referring to pagan shrines like the aforementioned Aesculapios) are actually healed. R. Akiba answers with a parable, which is quoted in thirteenth-century Jewish polemical literature.²⁹ As noted above, our author chose to omit this introduction and focus instead on the discussion between the demon and the Jew.

The ethical message embedded in the demon's statement is, therefore, a fundamental point of contention between Jews and Christians. According to the demon, although those who arrive at the shrine appear to leave healed, this is only a superficial, external healing, possibly even an optical illusion. The real reward — that in the world to come — is withheld from these misguided individuals. By allowing themselves to be led astray, they leave the righteous path and thus lose their promised heavenly reward. The demon thus makes a direct anti-Christian statement that seems designed to serve as a distorted mirror image of the Christian characterization of the Jews as Carnal Israel. Although the Jews might be corporeal misfits and cripples and may not be physically healed, they do receive the true spiritual reward in the world to come by virtue of refraining from going to the healing shrines of the saints. Interestingly enough, the demon phrases his statement in a manner that suggests that Christians, too, should forsake the superficial healing offered at the shrines and return to beseeching the Almighty directly.

This statement is by no means a novel one. It appears in Jewish works as early as the Talmud and is quoted in Jewish anti-Christian debate manuals from the medieval Franco-German world. Two well-articulated examples of this claim are found in Jewish Franco-German polemical works from the thirteenth century. The first is from the aforementioned *Sefer Nizzahon Yashan*, known also by its Latin name *Nizzahon Vetus (NV)*.³⁰ The anonymous thirteenth-century author of *NV* collected a

²⁸ Interestingly enough, the eleventh-century northern French Talmudic commentator Rabbi Shlomo ben Yizchak (Rashi) specifies that Zenon was not a gentile but an assimilated Hellenistic Jew. See his commentary on *b. Avodah Zarah* 55a.

²⁹ Berger, *The Jewish-Christian Debate*, 210–12 and notes on 330.

³⁰ The Hebrew word נִצְחוֹן means both victory and argument or debate. Preserved in a single manuscript in the University Library of Strasbourg, this work was first printed in 1681 by Johann Christoph Wagenseil (1633–1705), a German historian and Hebraist, in his *Tela Ignea Satanae* (= *The Fiery Arrows of the Devil*). See Johann Christoph Wagenseil, *Tela Ignea Satanae hoc est arcane et horribiles Judaeorum adversus Christum, Deum et Christianam Religionem Libri* (Aldorf: J. H.

variety of Jewish counter-arguments to Christian polemics as well as commenting on pressing contemporary questions that were relevant in the Franco-German sphere. Structured according to the order of the Hebrew Bible and focused on verses which form the core of the Jewish-Christian controversy, *NV* was a handy manual for Jews confronted with Christian polemic. It served both as a tool for external use against Christian antagonists and as a reinforcement of internal dogma. The second section of the book contains a broad critique of the Gospels and of common Christian beliefs and customs, including the cult of Christian saints. The longest and most elaborate discussion focusing on the latter appears in *NV* § 217.

Surprisingly enough, the Christian claim that miracles actually occur is not altogether discredited by *NV*. In the mind of the author or compiler, the miracles do indeed take place, but they are deliberately designed to mislead Christians and to mire them more deeply in their erroneous path of choice:

The fact remains, that saint so-and-so *does remarkable deeds* such as curing the blind, strengthening the weak, and freeing the imprisoned. This is how you should answer him [the Christian]: . . . a sickness has a specific time allotted to it, and it is faithful; it will not endure past its time and give the lie to its faithfulness even if it turns out that the sick man will be cured when he goes to some idolatrous practice. . . . He may then ask: Why didn't the end of the disease come before he came to the saint? Why is it that he was cured at the very moment that he came to the saint? Answer him: this is done to mislead you, as Job said: "He misleads nations and destroys them, he spreads out for the nations and leads them [Job 12:23], i.e., he spreads out a trap and leads them into it to be caught. Moreover, Isaiah said: "I am sought by them that asked not for me; I am found by them that sought me not. I said 'behold me' to a nation that was not called by my name. I spread out my hands all day unto a rebellious people which walks in the way that is not good, after their own thoughts . . . who eat swine's flesh. . . ." [Isa 65:1–4]³¹

The author of *NV* makes use of this last verse to prove that those who receive a cure from God are not necessarily beseeching him in the proper manner, but may rather be approaching him through the false mediation of the dead saints.³² The essence of the detailed discussion in *NV* is expressed in the demon's short explanation of why he has healed other cripples but refuses to heal the Jew.

Schönerstaedt, 1681). The original manuscript that was copied by Wagenseil in his book was lost in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870 when the Strasburg library sustained a direct artillery shell hit and was set ablaze. In the late 1970's David Berger published his invaluable bilingual annotated edition of the full text based on all the known sources. The quotes here are from this edition.

³¹ Berger, *Jewish-Christian Polemics*, § 217 (= English section pp. 210–11).

³² Jews had a special set of anti-Christian claims directed against the cult of the dead in Christianity and the Christian custom of church burials as well as burial within consecrated grounds. This practice seemed exceptionally counter-intuitive to Jews, for in Jewish law death is considered the most defiling form of impurity.

A similar claim can be found in another anonymous Jewish polemical source, *The Book of Debate: A Rebuke of the Minim*.³³ Among the many anti-Christian arguments set forth in this work are several concerning the alleged healing powers of Christian saints. In his argument, the Jewish polemist, much like the author of the above-quoted passage in *NV*, acknowledges the authenticity of the miraculous cures that take place at the shrines of the saints; however, he attributes them to the Creator (הבורא) and not to the saints' healing power. He also accuses Christian ecclesiastical authorities of deliberately misleading innocent people into believing that the saints are responsible for miraculous healing:

And if the gentile asks you: why doesn't the Creator work miracles on the Jews' behalf as he does for us Christians, proving his claim from their saints where the lame and the blind and the dumb go and are healed . . . and he says to you: what cured the lame and the blind and the dumb? Answer him: All God's loved ones are cured when the time comes, as we recite in prayer: "From bad and faithful illness [you deliver us]."³⁴ What is faithful about illnesses? They are faithful in their mission, for when the time comes they leave. And when the gentiles go to their churches and shrines, they think that the miracle is on account of the saints, and this is not so, for the Creator has done it, as Scripture says: "He misleads nations and destroys them." [Job 12:23]

This argument by the anonymous Jewish polemist uses similar contentions and the same biblical verse (Job 12:23) as *NV*, but with a different twist. Although the healing of the Christian is considered authentic, and although it appears to occur

³³ This Hebrew word, literally translated "heretics," is used as a code word for Christians as early as the second century C.E. This polemic manual can be found in ms Oxford, Bodleian Library 2289 fol. 30–58. I wish to take this opportunity to thank Prof. Israel Jacob Yuval for directing my attention to this manuscript. Paleographical analysis indicates that this short, never-published medieval Hebrew polemical tract should be dated no earlier than the fifteenth century. The manuscript itself is something of a riddle. Most of the material found within it is of a rather eclectic nature, but it echoes medieval Jewish rabbinic material; some of the contents, including the polemical tract, have much in common with the writings of the *Hasidei Ashkenaz* (Jewish pietists of medieval Germany). The material in this manuscript is recorded in Hebrew in a standard European script. Although, as noted above, the manuscript itself dates to no earlier than the fifteenth century, large portions of the text date to the thirteenth century, and most of the material is even older. Judah Rosenthal published a portion of this manuscript in *Mehqarim u-meqorot* (vol. 1 of *Studies and Texts in Jewish History, Literature and Religion*; Jerusalem: Rubin Mass, 1967) 368–72 (Hebrew), following an abridged version in ms Paris BN Heb. 1408. See Daniel Abrams, "The Boundaries of Divine Ontology: The Inclusion and Exclusion of Metatron in the Godhead," *HTR* 87 (1994) 291–321. On *Hasidei Ashkenaz* and their prominent spokesmen, including the aforementioned Rabbi Judah the Pious, see Ivan G. Marcus, *Piety and Society: The Jewish Pietists of Medieval Germany* (Leiden: Brill, 1981); Haym Soloveitchik, "Three Themes in *Sefer Hasidim*," *AJS Review* 1 (1976) 311–47 (here Soloveitchik discusses the role of "the Creator" in their theology); idem, "Piety, Pietism and German Pietism: *Sefer Hasidim* and the Influence of *Hasidei Ashkenaz*," *JQR* 92 (2002) 455–93. The scholarly discussion on *Hasidei Ashkenaz* was recently updated in an entire volume of the *Jewish Quarterly Review* dedicated to this subject (*JQR* 96:1 [2006]).

³⁴ *Nishmat Kol Hai*, Sabbath morning prayer, based on Deut 25:59.

through the mediation of the saint, this is all an illusion. The illness would have terminated anyway, regardless of the appeal to the saint, since illness itself is a faithful servant of the Creator and disappears when the Creator wills it, and only then.

Turning back again to the point at which we left the discussion between the demon and the disappointed Jewish cripple, the arguments should be understood in the context of the aforementioned concepts. After asserting that the Jew made a mistake in coming to the shrine, the demon provides the Jew (as well as the reader) with what can be characterized as the “proper Jewish way” to challenge a debilitating disease or physical condition. Rather than turning to the Christian shrines of healing saints, says the demon, “you should turn away (לקוץ) from idolatry and instead you should stand and pray directly to the Almighty, the Holy One, blessed be He, so that He will cure you.” The demon stresses that only a direct appeal to the Almighty, without the false mediation of the idolatrous saints, will bring a cure without compromising one’s heavenly reward. The author’s word choice in this last sentence is interesting. The Hebrew term לקוץ (to turn away from, revile) is highly unusual. This phrasing is unique to the version of the *Midrash on the Decalogue* found in MS Vatican Heb. 285 and suggests a double meaning. It seems that the German Jewish author, copyist, or compiler of our version of the *Midrash on the Decalogue* may have chosen לקוץ because of its similarity to the German word *ketzer*, meaning heretics. If a pun is indeed intended, it may constitute evidence that the appeal of the cult of saints among medieval Yiddish-speaking Franco-German Jewry was strong, especially during the time that MS Vatican Heb. 285 was written. Although the story appears in earlier versions, such a local alteration, as subtle as it is, may have been introduced to enhance the relevance of the text within a certain cultural context.

Many exempla were constructed to help homilists convey what they regarded as important messages to their audiences.³⁵ They may be entertaining, at times even funny, as long as they convey the moral message inherent in their purpose. The appearance of our story in this setting is telling, as are its connection to “idol worship” and what seems to be a linguistic pun in its concluding remark. While discussing the concrete implications of the second commandment of the Decalogue with his audience, the author or compiler could have easily brought up other issues relating to idol worship. Furthermore, he could have changed the setting and not mentioned the strong appeal of healing shrines, or he could have chosen a different main character, not necessarily a marginal lame Jew hoping to be healed. However, it was this version that he chose, and this was surely not without reason.

With this in mind, let us analyze the demon’s final remark. It is at this point that the demon strikes his final blow at the lame Jew and discloses a very troubling

³⁵ See Allan’s recent book on the construction of exempla in Middle English literature: Elizabeth Allan, *False Fables and Exemplary Truth in Later Middle English Literature* (New York: Macmillan, 2005) 1–27.

bit of information. The demon possesses knowledge of the divine world, a sphere of knowledge Jewish sources traditionally call “information from behind the curtain” (מֵאַחֲרֵי הַפְּרִיטוֹד). The demon tells the lame Jew that his disability was destined to be healed on that very day. However, due to the lame man’s appeal to the saint, the disability will endure forever, never to be cured. Again, we see how this short exemplum evokes themes typical of Jewish polemical literature, in this case regarding the finite nature of situations which to the disbelieving eye seem chronic. The demon explains that had the Jew beseeched God properly, directly, and refrained from seeking the healing powers of the saints, he would have been cured from his debilitating condition, for “the designated date for your cure had arrived.” This notion is encapsulated in the word “for ever” (לְעוֹלָם). By appealing to the aid of saints, the lame Jew therefore failed twice: he missed his window of opportunity to be physically healed, and he compromised his heavenly reward by transgressing in idol worship (עֲבוּדָה זָרָה).

The theme of a man who misses an opportunity to be healed due to his evildoing appears in a few other medieval Jewish exempla as well, one of which is the story of the “angry leper.” Although it is not an integral part of the *Midrash on the Decalogue*, Anat Shapira quotes this story in her appendix, since some of the versions of the midrash include it. The exemplum about the angry leper is a tale of the healing powers of the mythical Well of Miriam, a theme which demands scholarly scrutiny beyond the scope of this paper.³⁶ The story appears in several medieval Franco-German Jewish sources, in both manuscripts and in printed editions. The following version comes from an addendum to a collection of *responsa* of the aforementioned Rabbi Meir of Rothenburg.³⁷

There was once a man who was struck with *shekhin* (a skin disease). When his wife went to draw water from the well on Saturday night, she was delayed for an hour or two. A miracle occurred and he was cured. She chanced upon the miraculous Well of Miriam and filled her pitcher with its waters. Upon her arrival back home, her husband was furious with her and asked her angrily, “Where have you been?” Upon hearing this the wife was so upset and saddened that she dropped the pitcher and it fell from her shoulder and broke. Drops of water touched his diseased flesh and, miraculously, wherever the water touched his flesh he was healed. And regarding this the sages say, “Ultimately, all that an angry man gains is his anger.”³⁸

At this point, the author explains the background to the miraculous cure:

³⁶ See Ephraim Shoham-Steiner, “The Virgin Mary, Miriam and the Vicissitudes of Jewish Reactions to Marian Devotion in the High Middle Ages” (forthcoming).

³⁷ In this version, the story is recounted as a quote from *Sefer HaNachmani*, one of the lost halakhic works of Rabbi Nachman, the son of R. Haym Hacoen, a twelfth-century Jewish sage from northern France. On the lost writings of the Tosafists see Simcha Emmanuel, *The Fragments of the Tablets: Lost Books of the Tosaphists* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2006) 297–302 (Hebrew).

³⁸ *Qidd. 41a.*

The Well of Miriam was hidden in the Sea of Tiberias. It roams the springs and wells of the world every Saturday night and any sick person lucky enough to drink from its waters will be instantly cured, even if his entire body is leprous.³⁹

In this story, we hear again of the ill fortunes of those of little faith who, due to their disbelief, miss the opportunity to be delivered from illness. The “angry leper” exemplum is, of course, not a direct parallel to the story of the demon and the lame Jew, but the two tales do share some common features. One such feature is the theme of idolatry. Although this theme is not concretely manifested in the “angry leper” exemplum, it is implicit in the moral about anger; a much-quoted phrase in the Babylonian Talmud draws a direct parallel between one who succumbs to anger and an idol worshipper. In the tale of the demon and the lame Jew, the Jew misses the opportunity to be healed due to his idolatrous attempt to take advantage of the healing power of a saint. In the “angry leper” story the leper misses the opportunity to be healed due to his anger, which according to some traditions is tantamount to idolatry.

The logic behind this parallel is that succumbing to anger is capitulation to oneself instead of proper pious capitulation to divine will.⁴⁰ From a literary point of view, both stories reinforce a common feature of the medieval understanding of illness. Physical illness in both stories is a bodily manifestation of a spiritual malfunction, either disbelief or covert heresy.⁴¹

* * *

This article has discussed a text that provides a possible answer to the question of whether or not Jews actually approached the shrines of the healing saints in medieval Europe in search of cures. As we have seen, there is little chance of answering this question by means of concrete positive evidence because source material on these matters is rare. If we look instead to the writings of those who critiqued this phenomenon, however, we can find indirect evidence in exempla stories. These stories were probably designed for use in public sermons or as didactic texts. Members of the rabbinic elite who composed the stories, copied them, and altered them to fit their purposes intended for them to deliver a warning. The story of the lame Jew in MS Vatican Heb. 285 proves that Jewish use of the cult of healing saints

³⁹ The exemplum bares yet another interesting resemblance to the story of Godeliva and the Jewess discussed earlier in this article. In that exemplum too, anger (in that case St. Thomas Becket’s) prevented the use of potentially miraculous waters for healing.

⁴⁰ *B. Shabb.* 105b. This notion is also strongly advocated by Maimonides in his exegesis on *m. Avot* 2:9. Maimonides’ halakhic and exegetical works began circulating among Jewish scholars in Europe in the late twelfth century. Unlike his philosophical works, which were at the center of much controversy and at times even rejected, works of this nature were accepted and quoted extensively all over Western Europe.

⁴¹ I discuss this issue at length in my book: Ephraim Shoham-Steiner, *Involuntary Marginals: Lepers, Madmen and Disabled Individuals in Medieval European Jewish Society* (Jerusalem: Merkaz Zalman Shazar, 2007) (Hebrew). An English version of this book is in preparation.

was a troubling issue for the Jewish community at the time that it was composed. Close analysis of the exemplum indicates that it was composed, or at least modified, in Europe in the High Middle Ages. The story circulated among Judeo-German speaking Jews even though, like many tales of its kind, it was recorded in medieval Hebrew and not in the local vernacular.

The ideas in the story draw upon and share phrases, religious claims, and lines of reasoning with the Jewish anti-Christian polemical literature of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, providing a possible time frame for its first appearance. This literature functioned as double-edged sword, battling claims that came from outside the Jewish community while at the same time addressing internal issues resulting from the complexity of Judeo-Christian relations in medieval Europe.

The story of the lame Jew and the demon at the healing shrine warns against the practice of seeking aid for physically debilitating conditions from Christian shrines of the healing saints. It is designed to instill in potential pilgrims fear of the negative supernatural consequences of such a heretical endeavor. Jews did not altogether discredit the healing miracles that took place in these shrines. The social phenomenon of pilgrimages to the shrines was too widespread and the propaganda originating from them was too powerful to plainly deny. In our story, as in other Jewish polemics against the cult of saints, the saints' healing power is considered authentic. Jews did, however, discredit the miracles in a more subtle and sophisticated manner by interpreting them as caused by a heavenly force intended to mislead non-Jewish believers, drawing them further down the path of confessional error. In our story, which was designed for internal Jewish use, we hear the voice of the Jewish learned elite, which intended to instill in the populace the idea that seeking the aid of saints is not only objectionable from a confessional point of view, but may also be a detriment to one's physical and spiritual health. In order to battle the appeal of the healing shrines, the story conveys, both explicitly and implicitly, the message that the shrines are demonic and dangerous. The healing that they bring is characterized as merely superficial, with the potential to result in great twofold loss.

It seems clear that stories such as this did not circulate solely within the scholastic circles of those who read and wrote them. Their powerful and direct language, the possible plays on words, the precise articulation of their claims, and their connection to ideas that circulated in Jewish anti-Christian literature from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries all suggest that these stories were designed to battle an existing social phenomenon and not merely a literary specter. Even if this phenomenon was present only in the margins of medieval Jewish society (among those handicapped individuals who relentlessly sought to overcome their misfortune), the Jewish learned elite could not ignore it.

The battle against the appeal of the Christian healing shrines thus reflects the Jewish elite's concern for the spiritual wellbeing of its marginal individuals. These individuals were probably more tempted than healthier members of the community

to explore this possibility because of their strong desire to reverse their fortunes. Furthermore, the narrator's familiarity with the most intimate details of the events that took place at such shrines suggests knowledge of practices common on the "other side," within the neighboring Christian religious culture. The story's verisimilitude seems designed to instill the fear of God in those Jews who either contemplated seeking aid at these shrines or actually endeavored to do so. The whereabouts of these individuals are said to be well known, and their thoughts and deeds are thus compromised.

In light of this story, Jewish attempts to discredit the miracles of the healing saints, reinterpret them, and show them for what they truly are, as well as to offer an internal Jewish mechanism for faith healing, seem all the more important for a more nuanced appreciation of Jewish medieval culture and the challenges it faced.