

Sara Zfatman. *Jewish Exorcism in Early Modern Ashkenaz* [Hebrew]. Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2015

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One of the salient characteristics of spiritual life in Europe in the early modern era (the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries) was an increased sensitivity to supernatural phenomena, particularly those ascribed to the demonic realm. In the Christian world in this era, this was expressed in a veritable epidemic of accusations of witchcraft, mostly against women, as well as frequent and persistent accusations against Jews that they were in league with the devil, and that they regularly desecrated Christian sacra.

Within Jewish communities, a similar dynamic translated, among other things, into a series of narratives concerning spirits of the dead taking possession of the bodies of the living [*dybbuk*].

These spirit possession narratives have long held an important place in the Jewish folkloric imagination and they spurred a significant modern literary creation: the early twentieth century play “The Dybbuk” by S. Ansky. The early modern Jewish narratives, which begin in earnest in the kabbala-suffused intellectual atmosphere of Safed in the sixteenth century, have been studied by both Gedalyahu Nigal and, more recently, by J.H. Chajes in his English book, *Between Worlds: Dybbuks, Exorcists, and Early Modern Judaism* (2003).

Sara Zfatman of the Hebrew University, who specializes in early modern Yiddish literature and folklore, uses her formidable literary investigative abilities in order to shine important new light on spirit possession narratives among Ashkenazic communities in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In particular, this book showcases her talent as a meticulous literary detective in tracking down two major and several additional minor literary sources (some surviving in only one copy) in both Hebrew and Yiddish describing a spirit possession and exorcism that occurred in the Moravian town of Nikolsburg in 1696. She considers the Nikolsburg narratives to be of great significance as the model followed by subsequent spirit possession narratives among Ashkenazic Jews.

By judiciously comparing her sources and correlating them with the knowledge we possess of Moravian Jewry and its rabinate of that era, the author shows us not merely the bare facts of the incident (from several mostly complementary perspectives) but also with considerable specificity how the exorcism was handled and by whom. Most importantly, beyond the narrative sources, she has identified a manuscript (Oxford 1965, opp. 485) that she claims was the “handbook” utilized by the scholar conducting the exorcism, Moshe ben Menahem Preger.



Zfatman’s analysis, therefore, gives us a unique vantage point from which to examine the praxis of *kabbala ma’asit* [“practical kabbala”], the expertise of those claiming to be able to utilize the numinous power contained in divine names. The men who performed the exorcism rituals that Zfatman describes in such minute detail were often called *ba’alei shem* [masters of the utilization of divine names]. These men, the most famous of whom was Israel ben Eliezer, whom Hasidim revere as the founder of their movement, were much in demand in the Ashkenazi world of the eighteenth century from the Polish Commonwealth in the east to London in the west for healing, exorcism, protective amulets, and much else. Zfatman’s study adds significantly to our growing understanding of these men, what they believed, and how they practiced their profession.

Zfatman’s discussion of Ashkenazic intellectuals at the turn of the eighteenth century almost inevitably brings her to a consideration of the influence of the seventeenth century messianic movement of Shabbetai Zvi on these men. Scholars of early modern Judaism have long noted the tremendous influence and lasting power of Sabbatian belief on many rabbis, preachers, and scribes who remained within Jewish communities (as well as others whose Sabbatian beliefs drove them beyond the Jewish community into conversion to Islam or Christianity). Zfatman’s investigation largely substantiates Yehuda Liebes’ findings in this area and convincingly demonstrates that a large number of the men who took part in the Nikolsburg exorcism were likely Sabbatian believers themselves or at the very least travelled in intellectual circles replete with such believers.

Beyond its meticulous textual analysis which, refreshingly, lets us know not merely what Zfatman has discovered, but also those details on which she is still unclear, the book has the merit of publishing some 250 pages of primary documents in Yiddish and Hebrew that allow the reader to examine the material she presents independently. The book should be read by all those wishing to delve deeply into the spiritual and intellectual world of Ashkenazi Jews in early modernity.

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