

# WACKY TEXTS

## PART 1 – ELISHA AND THE BEARS



## THE STORY

### Text 1: 2 Kings 2:23–25<sup>i</sup>

וַיַּעַל ... בֵּית־אֵל וְהוּא עֹלֶה  
בַּדֶּרֶךְ וַנְּעָרִים קִטְנִים יֵצְאוּ מִן־  
הָעִיר וַיִּתְּקֻסּוּ־בּוֹ וַיֹּאמְרוּ לוֹ  
עֲלֵה קֶרַח עֲלֵה קֶרַח: וַיָּפֹן  
אֲחֵרָיו וַיִּרְאֵם וַיִּקְלֹלֵם בְּשֵׁם  
יְהוָה וַתֵּצֵאנָה שְׁתֵּי דְבִים מִן־  
הַיַּעַר וַתִּבְקַעְנָה מֵהֶם אַרְבָּעִים  
וּשְׁנֵי יְלָדִים: וַיֵּלֶךְ מִשָּׁם אֶל־הַר  
הַכַּרְמֶל:

Elisha went up to Bethel, and as he was coming up on the road, young lads came out from the town and jeered at him and said to him: “*Away with you, baldy, away with you, baldy!*”

And he turned behind him and saw them and cursed them in the name of the Eternal One, and two she-bears came out of the forest and ripped apart forty-two boys.

And he went from there to Mount Carmel.

<sup>i</sup> Adapted from Alter translation

## IN SEARCH OF MEANING

### Text 2: Rabbi Sylvia Rothschild<sup>ii</sup>

The rabbis try to explain the story in various ways – all unconvincingly – as a morality tale. But perhaps the moral is simple: don't mock people's appearance – you never know what it might spark!

### Text 3: Rashi to 2 Kings 2:24

ויראם — ראה שאין בהם ולא  
בזרעם לחלוחית של טובה.

*And he saw them* — he saw that neither they nor their  
descendants had the slightest trace of goodness in them.

### Text 4: Radak *ad loc*

...נחלקו רז"ל בזה כי קשה  
אליהם היאך גרם מיתה  
עליהם על דבר זה ... מהם  
אמרו ראה שכלם נתעברו  
אמותיהם ביום הכפורים  
כלומר ראה כי מעבירה  
באו וראוין היו למיתה.

The sages found it difficult to explain this story, because how could they explain Elishah causing so much death over such a trifling matter?

Some of them suggested that he perceived that the young lads had been conceived by their mothers on Yom Kippur, and, coming from such a sinful background, were deserving of death.

<sup>ii</sup> Rabbi Sylvia Rothschild, "The Bible says what? A prophet causes a bear to kill 42 youths", *The Jewish News* (9 May 2019): <<https://perma.cc/R9QY-ZQHE>>

### Text 3: b.Sotah 46b<sup>iii</sup>

אמר רבי יוחנן משום רבי  
מאיר כל שאינו מלוה  
ומתלוה כאילו שופך דמים  
שאי למלי ליווהו אנשי יריחו  
לאלישע לא גירה דובים  
לתינוקות.

Rabbi Yochanan says in the name of Rabbi Meir: “Whoever does not accompany another or will not allow himself to be accompanied is like a spiller of blood.”

Had the inhabitants of Jericho accompanied Elisha, he would not have incited the bears to attack the infants.

### Text 4: Rabbi Justin David<sup>iv</sup>

To accompany someone is not only a gesture of protection – it is a gesture of friendship on the deepest level, of caring for the essential wellbeing of another.

But with Elisha, the act of accompanying him is not to protect him from any danger. This is unnecessary, since as a prophet, Elisha receives protection from God. Rather, Rabbi Yochanan suggests that Elisha requires protection from himself!

In his extreme spiritual isolation, Elisha is liable to harbour distrust and even hatefulness toward the many who live up to God’s demands imperfectly or not at all. Alone in his prophetic mission, Elisha risks becoming a fanatic, and allowing his zealotry to wreak destruction on those who are ignorant or disdainful of God’s ways. True, Elisha is special and unique. But that doesn’t mean he should go about the world ‘unaccompanied’, meaning standing radically apart from humanity.

<sup>iii</sup> Adapted from Steinsaltz translation

<sup>iv</sup> Justin David, *Longing* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2018): 89.

# WACKY TEXTS

## PART 2 – MAGIC



## HISTORY

### Text 1: Avigail Manekin-Bamberger<sup>i</sup>



More than 600 Jewish Aramaic incantation bowls, created in Sasanian Babylonia roughly 1,500 years ago, have been researched and published, while at least three times that number remain unpublished. They contain numerous incantations, usually designated for the general protection of a named individual but also designated for other purposes such as medical cures, business prosperity, love charms, curses and more.

A number of scholars have proposed historical identifications of the bowl authors. In 1913, James Montgomery made an important distinction between, on the one hand, the majority of the bowls written by “*exorcists*” with “*professional possession of occult powers*” and, on the other, the poorly written bowls, especially in pseudo-script, which he suggested were written by laymen. About a century later, Shaul Shaked also emphasised the wide range of writing skills of the authors of the bowls while noting the range of knowledge of scripture and other Jewish expressions. Shaked suggested that the authors who were learned in matters of Jewish formulae were connected to the “*rabbinic tradition*”.

In one carefully written bowl, there is an intriguing text designated for the protection of Berik Yehabya son of Mama. The bowl ends with a unique spell for protection: “*I adjure you in the name of He who is great and fearsome that you may silence for Berik Yehabya son of Mama the*

<sup>i</sup> Avigail Manekin-Bamberger, “Who wrote these magical ancient Jewish bowls?”, National Library of Israel (2 August 2022): <<https://perma.cc/9MWR-59GU>>

*mouths of all people who write books, so that their tongues should cleave to their mouths, and that they should not speak evil words against me. In the name of he who commanded and it came into being. Amen, Amen, Selah.”*

This leads to the question: why would the client, Berik Yehabya, seek protection from writers of books? Perhaps, because these writers are professional scribes who curses and magical spells, such as bowls. Thus, this scribe is attempting to silence the mouths of other scribes who write curses. From this it would seem that the way this magic bowl author referred to himself and to his competitors is not as professional magicians or sorcerers, but as scribes. Indeed, among the malevolent forces the bowl incantations regularly sought to ward off are other curses and spells aimed at the clients. This unique incantation would therefore target not only the opposing incantations, but the scribes responsible for them.

## STORY

### Text 2: b.Sanhedrin 68a<sup>ii</sup>

...אני שונה שלש מאות  
הלכות, ואמרי לה שלשת  
אלפים הלכות, בנטיעת  
קשואין ולא היה אדם שואלני  
בהן דבר מעולם, חוץ מעקיבא  
בן יוסף. פעם אחת אני והוא  
מהלכין היינו בדרך, אמר לי:  
רבי, למדני בנטיעת קשואין.  
אמרתי דבר אחד נתמלאה כל  
השדה קשואין. אמר לי: רבי,  
למדתני נטיעתן - למדני  
עקירתן. אמרתי דבר אחד,  
נתקבצו כולן למקום אחד.

Rabbi Eliezer said:

I can teach three hundred laws (and some say that Rabbi Eliezer actually said three thousand laws) with regard to the planting of cucumbers by sorcery, but no person has ever asked me anything about them besides Akiva ben-Yosef. Once he and I were walking along the way and he said to me: “*My teacher, teach me about the planting of cucumbers.*” I uttered a single word and the entire field became filled with cucumbers. He said to me: “*My teacher, you have taught me about planting them; now teach me about uprooting them.*” I uttered a single word and they all were gathered to one place.

### Text 3: b.Sanhedrin 65b<sup>iii</sup>

רב חנינא ורב אושעיא הוו  
יתבי כל מעלי שבתא ועסקי  
בספר יצירה ומיברי להו  
עיגלא תילתא ואכלי ליה.

Rav Chanina and Rav Oshaya would sit every Friday evening and engage in the study of Sefer Y'tzira, and a third-born calf would be created for them and they would eat it.

<sup>ii</sup> Adapted from Steinsaltz translation

<sup>iii</sup> Adapted from Steinsaltz translation



#### Text 4: y.Sanhedrin 7:13, 25d

אמר רבי יהושע בן חנניה יכיל  
אנא נסיב קריין ואבטיחין  
ועביד לון איילין טבין והידנון  
עבידין איילין וטבין.

Rebbi Y'hoshua ben-Chananyah said:

I am able to take gourds and watermelons and turn them into  
rams and deer who would produce further rams and deer.

#### Text 5: b.Pesachim 110a<sup>iv</sup>

אמר לי יוסף שידא: אשמדאי  
מלכא דשידי ממונה הוא  
אכולהו זוגי ... ואי אישתלי  
ואיקרי ונפק, מאי תקנתיה?  
- לינקוט זקפא דידיה  
דימיניה בידא דשמאליה,  
וזקפא דשמאליה בידא  
דימיניה, ונימא הכי: אתון  
ואנא - הא תלתא. ואי שמיע  
ליה דאמר: אתון ואנא הא  
ארבעה נימא ליה אתון ואנא  
הא חמשה. ואי שמיע ליה  
דאמר: אתון ואנא הא שיתא  
- נימא ליה: אתון ואנא הא  
שבעה. הוה עובדא עד מאה  
וחד, ופקע שידא.

Rav Yosef said:

Yosef the Demon said to me: “*Ashmedai, the king of the demons, is appointed over all who perform actions in pairs.*”

And if one forgets and it happens that they go outside after having drunk an even number of cups, what is the solution? They should take their right thumb in their left hand, and their left thumb in their right hand, and say as follows: “*You, my thumbs, and I make three, which is not a pair.*” And if they hear a voice that says: “*Including me, that makes four,*” they should reply: “*You and I are five.*” And if they hear it say: “*You and I are six,*” they should say to it: “*You and I are seven.*” There was an incident in which someone kept counting after the demon until reaching 101, and the demon exploded in frustration.

<sup>iv</sup> Adapted from Steinsaltz translation

## ANALYSIS

### Text 6: Adam Kirsch<sup>v</sup>

What is most fascinating here is not the existence of superstition, which is common to all ancient cultures, and certainly has not disappeared from modern ones. Rather, it is the way the Gemara goes on to perform an authentically Talmudic analysis of these superstitions. Just as the rabbis codify in great detail exactly what can and can't be moved on Shabbat, so they lay out the rules and exceptions about interactions with demons.

This suggests that the Talmud's general commitment to exact measurement and correct action – the need to find out exactly how to behave in order to please God, down to the order in which you put on your shoes in the morning – is itself a kind of magical thinking. For the rabbis, Jews are the protagonists of a cosmic drama in which their every slightest action will be either rewarded or punished.

And yet, for all the extravagant superstition on display, there was also a hard kernel of good psychological sense. The Gemara explains<sup>vi</sup> that while the Jews of Babylonia were worried about pairs, in Palestine they were indifferent to the subject. *“The rule of the matter is that all who are particular about pairs, the demons are particular with them; and if one is not particular, they are not particular with them.”* This almost says that the whole idea of pairs being cursed is a self-fulfilling prophecy: If we suffer from performing even-numbered actions, it's because we expect to suffer. Even so, this doesn't mean that the demons don't exist.

<sup>v</sup> Adam Kirsch, “Magical thinking, superstition, and incantations in Jewish oral law”, *Tablet Mag* (15 October 2013): <<https://archive.ph/8iyE7>>

<sup>vi</sup> b.Pesachim 110b

# WACKY TEXTS

## PART 3 – SATAN



## BIBLE

### Text 1: Job 1<sup>i</sup>

אִישׁ הָיָה בְּאֶרֶץ עוּץ אִיּוֹב שְׁמוֹ  
וְהָיָה הָאִישׁ הַהוּא תָם וְיָשָׁר וִירָא  
אֱלֹהִים וְסָר מֵרָע: וַיּוֹלְדּוּ לוֹ  
שִׁבְעָה בָנִים וְשְׁלוֹשׁ בָּנוֹת: וַיְהִי  
מִקְנֵהוּ שִׁבְעַת אֲלָפֵי צֹאן וְשִׁלְשַׁת  
אֲלָפֵי גְמָלִים וְחֲמֵשׁ מֵאוֹת צֶמֶד  
בָּקָר וְחֲמֵשׁ מֵאוֹת אֲתוֹנוֹת וְעֶבְדָּה  
רַבָּה מְאֹד וַיְהִי הָאִישׁ הַהוּא גָדוֹל  
מִכָּל בְּנֵי קֶדֶם: וְהָלְכוּ בָנָיו וְעָשׂוּ  
מִשְׁתָּה בֵּית אִישׁ יוֹמוֹ וְשָׁלְחוּ  
וְקִרְאוּ לְשִׁלְשַׁת אַחֵיתֵיהֶם לֶאֱכֹל  
וְלִשְׁתּוֹת עִמָּהֶם: וַיְהִי כִי הִקִּיפוּ  
יָמֵי הַמִּשְׁתָּה וַיִּשְׁלַח אִיּוֹב  
וַיִּקְדָּשֶׁם וְהִשְׁכִּים בַּבֹּקֶר וְהָעֶלְהָ  
עֹלוֹת מִסֹּפֶר כָּלָם כִּי אָמַר אִיּוֹב  
אוּלִי חָטָאוּ בָנִי וּבִרְכוּ אֱלֹהִים  
בְּלִבָּבָם כִּכָּה יַעֲשֶׂה אִיּוֹב כָּל  
הַיָּמִים: וַיְהִי הַיּוֹם וַיָּבֹאוּ בָנֵי  
הָאֱלֹהִים לְהִתְיַצֵּב עַל יְהוָה וַיָּבֹאוּ  
גַם הַשָּׁטָן בְּתוֹכָם: וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה  
אֶל הַשָּׁטָן מֵאֵין תָּבֹא וַיַּעַן הַשָּׁטָן  
אֶת יְהוָה וַיֹּאמֶר מִשׁוּט בְּאֶרֶץ  
וַיַּהֲתֵלֵךְ בָּהּ: וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל

A man there was in the land of Uz: his name was Job. And the man was blameless and upright and feared God and shunned evil. And seven sons were born to him, and three daughters. And his flocks came to seven thousand sheep and three thousand camels and five hundred yokes of cattle and five hundred she-asses and a great abundance of slaves. And that man was greater than all the others in his region.

And his sons would go and hold a feast, in each one's house on his set day, and they would call to their sisters to eat and drink with them. And it happened when the days of the feast came round, that Job would send and consecrate them and rise early in the morning and offer up burnt offerings according to the number of them all. For Job thought: *“Perhaps my children have offended and cursed God in their hearts.”* Thus would Job do at all times.

And one day, the children of God came to stand in attendance before the Eternal One, and the Satan, too, came among them. And the Eternal said to the Satan: *“Where have you been?”* And the Satan answered the Eternal and said: *“Roaming the earth*

<sup>i</sup> Adapted from Alter translation

הַשָּׁטָן הִשְׁמָתָ לְבָדֶּךָ עַל עַבְדִּי אִיּוֹב  
כִּי אֵין כָּמֹהוּ בָּאָרֶץ אִישׁ תָּם וְיָשָׁר  
יָרָא אֱלֹהִים וְסָר מֵרָע: וַיַּעַן הַשָּׁטָן  
אֶת יְהוָה וַיֹּאמֶר הַחֲנֹם יָרָא אִיּוֹב  
אֱלֹהִים: הֲלֹא אַתָּה שִׁכַּתָּ  
בְּעָדוֹ וּבְעָד בֵּיתוֹ וּבְעָד כָּל אֲשֶׁר  
לוֹ מִסָּבִיב מַעֲשֵׂה יָדָיו בְּרַכָּתָּ  
וּמִקְנֵהוּ פָּרָץ בָּאָרֶץ: וְאוֹלָם שָׁלַח  
נָא יָדְךָ וְגַע בְּכָל אֲשֶׁר לוֹ אִם לֹא  
עַל פְּנוֹיֶךָ יְבָרְכֶךָ: וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל  
הַשָּׁטָן הִנֵּה כָּל אֲשֶׁר לוֹ בְּיָדְךָ רַק  
אֵלָיו אֵל תִּשְׁלַח יָדְךָ וַיֵּצֵא הַשָּׁטָן  
מִעַם פְּנֵי יְהוָה: וַיְהִי הַיּוֹם וּבָנָיו  
וּבָנֹתָיו אֹכְלִים וְשׂוֹתִים יַיִן בְּבֵית  
אֲחֵיהֶם הַבְּכוֹר: וּמִלֶּאךָ בָּא אֶל  
אִיּוֹב וַיֹּאמֶר הַבָּקָר הָיוּ חֹרְשׁוֹת  
וְהָאֲתָנוֹת רְעוֹת עַל יְדֵיהֶם: וְתַפְלִ  
שָׁבָא וְתִקְחֵם וְאֵת הַנְּעָרִים הַכּוֹ  
לְפִי חָרַב וְאִמְלָטָה רַק אֲנִי לְבַדִּי  
לְהִגִּיד לָךְ: עוֹד זֶה מְדַבֵּר וְזֶה בָּא  
וַיֹּאמֶר אֵשׁ אֱלֹהִים נָפְלָה מִן  
הַשָּׁמַיִם וְתִבְעַר בְּצֹאן וּבְנְעָרִים  
וְתֹאכְלֵם וְאִמְלָטָה רַק אֲנִי לְבַדִּי  
לְהִגִּיד לָךְ: עוֹד זֶה מְדַבֵּר וְזֶה בָּא  
וַיֹּאמֶר כְּשָׂדִים שָׁמוּ שְׁלֹשָׁה  
רָאשִׁים וַיִּפְשְׁטוּ עַל הַגְּמָלִים  
וַיִּקְחוּם וְאֵת הַנְּעָרִים הַכּוֹ לְפִי

and walking about in it.” And the Eternal said to the Satan: “Have you paid heed to My servant Job, for there is none like him on earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and shuns evil?” And the Satan answered the Eternal One and said: “Does Job fear God for nothing? Have You not hedged him about and his household and all that he has all around? The work of his hands You have blessed, and his flocks have spread over the land. And yet, reach out Your hand, pray, and strike all he has. Will he not curse You to Your face?” And the Eternal said to the Satan: “Look, all that he has is in your hands. Only against him himself do not reach out your hand.” And the Satan went out from before the Eternal’s presence.

And one day, Job’s sons and his daughters were eating and drinking wine in the house of their brother, the firstborn. And a messenger came to Job and said: “The cattle were ploughing and the she-asses grazing by them, and Sabeans fell upon them and took them, and the lads they struck down by the edge of the sword, and I alone escaped to tell you.” This one was still speaking when another came and said: “God’s fire fell from the heavens and burned among the sheep and the lads and consumed them, and I alone escaped to tell you.” This one was still speaking when another came and said: “Chaldeans set out in three bands and pounced upon the camels and took them, and the lads they struck

חָרַב וְאַמְלָטָה רַק אֲנִי לְבִדִּי  
 לְהַגִּיד לָךְ: עַד זֶה מְדַבֵּר וְזֶה בָּא  
 וַיֹּאמֶר בְּנִיךָ וּבָנוֹתֶיךָ אֹכְלִים  
 וְשׂתִּים יֵין בְּבֵית אָחִיהֶם הַבְּכוֹר:  
 וְהִנֵּה רוּחַ גְּדוֹלָה בָּאָה מֵעֵבֶר  
 הַמְדַּבֵּר וַיִּגַע בְּאַרְבַּע פְּנוֹת הַבַּיִת  
 וַיִּפֹּל עַל הַנְּעָרִים וַיָּמּוּתוּ וְאַמְלָטָה  
 רַק אֲנִי לְבִדִּי לְהַגִּיד לָךְ: וַיָּקָם  
 אִיּוֹב וַיִּקְרַע אֶת מְעָלוֹ וַיִּגְזַז אֶת  
 רֹאשׁוֹ וַיִּפֹּל אֶרְצָה וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוֶה: וַיֹּאמֶר  
 עָרָם יֵצְתִי יִצְאָתִי מִבֶּטֶן אִמִּי  
 וְעָרָם אָשׁוּב שָׁמָּה יְהוָה נָתַן וַיְהוּה  
 לָקַח יְהִי שֵׁם יְהוָה מְבֹרָךְ: בְּכָל  
 זֹאת לֹא חָטָא אִיּוֹב וְלֹא נָתַן  
 תְּפִלָּה לְאֱלֹהִים:

## WORD

### Text 2: Jastrow's dictionary

סטן – to be hostile to; to hinder, accuse; hinderer, enemy; the accuser, the seducer, Satan.

*down by the edge of the sword.” This one was still speaking when another came and said: “Your sons and your daughters were eating and drinking wine in the house of their brother, the firstborn. And, look, a great wind came from beyond the wilderness and struck the four corners of the house, and it fell on the young people, and they died. And I alone escaped to tell you.”*

*And Job rose and tore his garment and shaved his head and fell to the earth and bowed down. And he said: “Naked I came out from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return there. God has given and God has taken away. Blessed be the name of God.”*

With all this, Job did not offend, nor did he put blame on the Eternal One.

## CELESTIAL ROLE

### Text 3: Pesikta Rabbati 45<sup>ii</sup>

ביוה"כ בא שטן לקטרג את  
ישראל והוא פורט את  
עונותיהם של ישראל ואמר  
רבונו של עולם יש באומות  
העולם מנאפים וכן בישראל,  
יש באומות העולם גנבים וכן  
בישראל, והקדוש ברוך הוא  
פורט את זכויותיהם של ישראל,  
מהו עושה ... ושוקל את העונות  
כנגד הזכויות, והם נשקלים  
העונות והזכויות אילו כנגד אילו  
ושתי הכפות של מאזנים  
נמצאים מעויינות, והשטן הולך  
להביא עונות וליתן בכף  
העונות ולהכריעה, מה הקדוש  
ברוך הוא עושה, עד שהשטן  
חוזר ומבקש עונות הקדוש  
ברוך הוא נוטל את העונות  
מתוך הכף ומטמינם תחת  
פורפירה שלו, והשטן בא ואינו  
מוצא שם עון, שנאמר יבוקש  
עון ישראל ואיננו.

On the Day of Atonement, Satan comes to accuse Israel and specifies the iniquities of Israel, saying: *"Sovereign of the universe, there are adulterers among the nations of the earth; so, too, among Israel. There are thieves among the nations of the earth; so, too, among Israel."*

But the Holy One, ever to be blessed, specifies the just deeds of Israel. Then what does God do? God looks to see what the balance or imbalance is between the iniquities and the just deeds. And as they are weighed – the iniquities against the just deeds, these against those – the two pans of the scale balance exactly.

Thereupon Satan goes out to fetch more iniquities to put in the pan of iniquities and bring it down. What does the Holy One, ever to be blessed, do? While Satan is going about seeking iniquities, the Holy One, ever to be blessed, takes the iniquities out of the pan and hides them under the Divine purple robe. Then Satan comes and finds no iniquity on the scales, as is said *The iniquity of Israel shall be sought for, and there shall be none (Jeremiah 50:20)*.

<sup>ii</sup> Adapted from Braude translation



#### Text 4: b.Yoma 20a

אמר רמי בר חמא: השטן בגמטריא  
תלת מאה ושיתין וארבעה הוי, תלת  
מאה ושיתין וארבעה יומי אית ליה  
רשותא לאסטוני, ביומא דכיפורי  
לית ליה רשותא לאסטוני.

Rabbi Rami bar-Chamma said:

‘The Satan’, numerologically, has a value of 364. So 364 days of the year, Satan has a licence to prosecute. But on Yom Kippur, he has no licence to prosecute.

#### SATAN AND TEMPTATION

#### Text 5: b.Kiddushin 81a-b<sup>iii</sup>

פלימו הוה רגיל למימר כל יומא:  
גירא בעיניה דשטן. יומא חד  
מעלי יומא דכיפורי הוה, אידמי  
ליה כעניא, אתא קרא אבבא,  
אפיקו ליה ריפתא, אמר ליה:  
יומא כי האידנא כולי עלמא  
גואי, ואנא אבראי? עייליה  
וקריבו ליה ריפתא. אמר ליה:  
יומא כי האידנא כולי עלמא  
אתכא, ואנא לחודאי? אתיוהו  
אותבוהו אתכא. הוה יתיב ...  
והוה קעביד ביה מילי דמאיס,  
א"ל: תיב שפיר. אמר ליה: הבו  
לי כסא, יהבו ליה כסא, אכמר  
שדא ביה כיחו, נחרו ביה, שקא  
ומית. שמעו דהוו קאמרי: פלימו

Plimo used to say every day: “*An arrow in the eye of Satan!*” One day, it was the eve of Yom Kippur, and Satan appeared to him as a pauper who came and called him to the door, requesting alms. Plimo brought out bread to him.

Satan said: “*On a day like today, everyone is inside eating, shall I stand outside and eat?*” Plimo brought him inside and gave him bread. Satan said: “*On a day like today, everyone is sitting at the table, and shall I sit by myself?*” Plimo sat him at the table. He was sitting and doing repulsive things at the table. Plimo said to the pauper: “*Sit properly.*” Satan then said: “*Give me a cup.*” Plimo gave him a cup. Satan coughed up his phlegm and spat it into the cup. Plimo berated him for acting this way, at which point Satan pretended to sink down and die.

<sup>iii</sup> Adapted from Steinsaltz translation



קטל גברא! פלימו קטל גברא!  
ערק וטשא נפשיה בבית הכסא,  
אזיל בתריה נפל קמיה. כי  
דחזייה דהוה מצטער גלי ליה  
נפשיה, אמר ליה: מאי טעמא  
אמרת הכי? ואלא היכי אימא?  
אמר ליה, לימא מר: רחמנא נגער  
ביה בשטן.

#### Text 6: b.Shabbat 89a

בשעה שעלה משה למרום אמר  
להן לישראל: לסוף ארבעים  
יום, בתחלת שש, אני בא. לסוף  
ארבעים יום בא שטן ועירבב  
את העולם, אמר להן: משה  
רבכם היכן הוא? אמרו לו: עלה  
למרום. אמר להן: באו שש ולא  
השגיחו עליו. מת ולא השגיחו  
עליו. הראה להן דמות מטתו.  
והיינו דקאמרי ליה לאהרן וגו'.

The household then heard people around them saying: “*Plimo killed a man! Plimo killed a man!*”

Plimo fled and hid himself in the bathroom. Satan followed him and fell before him. Upon seeing that Plimo was suffering, he revealed himself. Satan said: “*What is the reason that you spoke this way, provoking me by saying, ‘An arrow in the eye of Satan?’*” Plimo replied: “*What then should I say?*” Satan replied: “*Say, ‘Let the Merciful One rebuke the Satan.’*”

When Moses ascended on high, he said to the Israelites: “*I will be back in 40 days, give or take six hours.*” After 40 days precisely, Satan came and darkened the world, and said: “*Moses, your leader, where is he?*” They replied: “*Up the mountain.*” Satan said: “*But it’s already been six hours after 40 days!*” The Israelites ignored him. “*Moses has died!*” cried Satan. The Israelites ignored him. Finally, he conjured up a vision of Moses lying dead, and that is when the Israelites asked Aaron to build a golden calf.

## LOOKING BACK

### Text 8: Rabbi Lydia Medwin<sup>iv</sup>

Satan in Jewish tradition is often understood as a metaphor for some inner struggle.

<sup>iv</sup> Rabbi Lydia Medwin, “The difficulties of ethical decision making”, *Reform Judaism* (November 2014): <<https://perma.cc/G9ZZ-6EEQ>>

# WACKY TEXTS

## PART 4 – WHAT DID THE RABBIS DO?



## TEMPTATION

### Text 1: b.Kiddushin 81a<sup>i</sup>

הנך שבוייתא דאתאי לנהרדעא,  
אסקינהו לבי רב עמרם חסידא,  
אשקולו דרגא מקמייהו, בהדי  
דקא חלפה חדא מנייהו נפל  
נהורא באיפומא, שקליה רב  
עמרם לדרגא דלא הוו יכלין בי  
עשרה למדלייא, דלייא לחודיה.  
סליק ואזיל, כי מטא לפלגא דרגא  
איפשח, רמא קלא: נורא בי  
עמרם! אתו רבנן, אמרו ליה:  
כסיפתינן! אמר להו: מוטב  
תיכספו בי עמרם בעלמא הדין,  
ולא תיכספו מיניה לעלמא דאתי.  
אשבעיה דינפק מיניה, נפק מיניה  
כי עמודא דנורא, אמר ליה: חזי,  
דאת נורא ואנא בישרא, ואנא  
עדיפנא מינך.

Some vulnerable women who were brought to Nehardea, and taken to stay at the house of Rav Amram the Pious. They removed the ladder from before them to prevent men from climbing up after them to the attic where they were to sleep. When one of them passed by the entrance to the upper chamber, it was as though a light shone in the aperture due to her great beauty.

Rav Amram grabbed a ladder that ten men together could not lift, lifted it on his own and began climbing. When he was halfway up the ladder, he strengthened his legs against the sides of the ladder to stop himself from climbing further, raised his voice, and cried out: “*There is a fire in the house of Amram!*” Upon hearing this, the Sages came and found him in that position.

<sup>i</sup> Adapted from Steinsaltz translation

## PRANKS AND HIGH JINX

### Text 2: y.Ketubot 12:3, 35a<sup>ii</sup>

רבי הוה עינוון סגין והוה  
אמ' ... אין סליק רב הונא  
ריש גלות' להכא אנא מותיב  
לעיל מיני דהוא מן יהוד'  
ואנא מן בנימן דהוא מן  
דכרייא ואנא מן נוקבתא חד  
זמן עאל רבי חייה רבה  
לגביה אמ' ליה הא רב הונא  
לכאן נתכרכמו פניו של רבי  
אמר ליה אדוני הוא אמר ליה  
פוק חמי מה בעי לכאן נפק  
ולא אשכח בר נש וידע דהוא  
כעיס עלוי.

Rabbi Yehudah ha-Nasi was very meek and said: *“If Rav Huna, the Exilarch, came here, I would let him sit higher than myself since he is from the tribe of Judah and I am from Benjamin, he is from the male line and I am from the female.”*

Once, the elder Rabbi Chiyya visited him and said: *“Rav Huna is here!”* The face of Rabbi became saffron-colored. Then Rabbi Chiyya said to him: *“He’s here in a coffin!”*

Rabbi Yehudah ha-Nasi said to him: *“Go outside and look who wants you there.”* Rabbi Chiyya stepped outside and did not find anybody; he understood that Rabbi Yehudah ha-Nasi was angry with him.

### Text 3: b.Sanhedrin 65b

רבא ברא גברא, שדריה לקמיה דרבי  
זירא. הוה קא משתעי בהדיה, ולא  
הוה קא מהדר ליה. אמר ליה: מן  
חבריא את, הדר לעפריך.

Rava made a man. He sent the man to visit Rabbi Zeira. Rabbi Zeira tried speaking to him, but got no reply. He said to the man: *“One of the guys made you, didn’t they! Return to your dust.”*

<sup>ii</sup> Adapted from Guggenheimer translation

#### Text 4: b.Megillah 7b

רבה ורבי זירא עבדו סעודת  
פורים בהדי הדדי, איבסום,  
קם רבה שחטיה לרבי זירא.  
למחר בעי רחמי ואחייה.  
לשנה אמר ליה: ניתי מר  
ונעביד סעודת פורים בהדי  
הדדי! אמר ליה: לא בכל  
שעתא ושעתא מתרחיש ניסא.

Rava and Rabbi Zeira were enjoying a Purim feast together. They got drunk and Rava stood up and killed Rabbi Zeira.

The next morning, Rava asked God for mercy and he<sup>iii</sup> brought Rabbi Zeira back to life.

One year later, Rava said to Rabbi Zeira: “*Come to my Purim feast again!*” But Rabbi Zeira replied: “*Miracles don’t happen every time!*”

#### CLASHES

#### Text 5: y.Shabbat 1:4, 3c

אילו מהלכות שאמרו  
בעלית חנניה בן חזקיה בן  
גרון כשעלו לבקרו ... אותו  
היום היה קשה לישר' כיום  
שנעשה בו העגל ... תנא רבי  
יהושע אונייא תלמידי ב"ש  
עמדו להן מלמטה והיו  
הורגין בתלמידי בית הלל ...  
בחרבות וברמחי' תני  
שמונה עשר דבר גזרו.

This is the story of the laws that were confirmed in the attic of Chananiah ben-Chizqiah ben-Garon, when the sages went to visit him. That day was as hard for the Jewish people as the day that the golden calf was made.

Rebbi Y’hoshua Onnaya taught that the students of Beit Shammai stood downstairs and killed the students of Beit Hillel with swords and spears.

And it is taught that eighteen laws were decreed on that day.

<sup>iii</sup> It’s unclear whether this should actually read ‘He’, viz God.

**Text 6: y.Sanhedrin 2:1, 19b–20a<sup>iv</sup>**

...ריש לקיש אמר נשיא  
שחטא מלקין אותו בב"ד של  
שלשה ... שמע ר' יודן נשיא  
וכעס שלח גנתן למיתפוס  
לריש לקיש טרפון ... למחר  
סלק ר' יוחנן לבית וועדא  
וסלק רבי יודן נשיא לבית  
וועדא. א"ל למה לית מרי  
אמר לון מילא דאורייתא. שרי  
טפח בחדא ידיה א"ל ובחדא  
טפחין אלא א"ל לא ולא בן  
לקיש לא ... א"ל ומה חמית  
מימר הא מילתא. אמר לון  
מה אתון סברין מה דחיל  
מינכון הוינא מנע אולפניה  
דרחמנא.

Reish Lakish said: *"If the Nasi sins, one whips him on the orders of three judges."* Rabbi Yehudah ha-Nasi heard this and became angry. He sent Goths to catch Reish Lakish. They beat him.

The next day, Rabbi Yochanan and Rabbi Yehudah ha-Nasi were both in the study hall. Rabbi Yehudah asked: *"Why are you not teaching?"* Rabbi Yochanan started clapping with one hand. Rabbi Yehudah asked: *"Does a person normally clap with one hand?"* Rabbi Yochanan answered him: *"No, but without Reish Lakish, there is nothing."*

Rabbi Yehudah went to Reish Lakish and asked him: *"Why did you give such an objectionable teaching?"* Reish Lakish replied: *"Did you really imagine that for fear of you I would refrain from expounding the teachings of the Merciful One?"*

<sup>iv</sup> Adapted from Guggenheimer translation

## AFFECTION

### Text 7: b.Bava Metzia 84a<sup>v</sup>

יומא חד הוה קא סחי רבי  
יוחנן בירדנא, חזייה ריש  
לקיש ושוור לירדנא  
אבתריה, אמר ליה: חילך  
לאורייתא! אמר ליה:  
שופרך לנשי! אמר ליה:  
אי הדרת בך יהיבנא לך  
אחותי, דשפירא מינאי.  
קביל עליה ... אקרייה  
ואתנייה, ושווייה גברא  
רבא. יומא חד הוו מפלגי  
בי מדרשא: הסייף  
והסכין והפגיון והרומח  
ומגל יד ומגל קציר  
מאימתי מקבלין טומאה  
משעת גמר מלאכתן,  
ומאימתי גמר מלאכתן?  
רבי יוחנן אומר:  
משיצרפם בכבשן, ריש  
לקיש אמר: משיצחצחון  
במים. אמר ליה: לסטאה  
בלסטיותיה ידע! אמר  
ליה: ומאי אהנת לי? ...

One day, Rabbi Yochanan was bathing in the Jordan River. Reish Lakish saw him and jumped into the Jordan, pursuing him. At that time, Reish Lakish was the leader of a band of marauders.

Rabbi Yochanan said to Reish Lakish: *“Your strength is fit for Torah study.”* Reish Lakish said to him: *“Your beauty is fit for women.”* Rabbi Yochanan said to him: *“If you return to the pursuit of Torah, I will give you my sister in marriage, who is more beautiful than I am.”*

Reish Lakish accepted upon himself to study Torah. Rabbi Yochanan taught Reish Lakish the whole corpus of Jewish texts, and turned him into a great man.

One day the Sages of the study hall were engaging in a dispute. Bladed objects are susceptible to ritual impurity from the time of the completion of their manufacture. But when is the completion of their manufacture? Rabbi Yochanan says: *“It is from when one fires these items in the furnace.”* Reish Lakish said: *“It is from when one cools them in water, after they have been fired in the furnace.”*

Rabbi Yochanan said to Reish Lakish: *“A bandit knows about tools.”* Reish Lakish said to Rabbi Yochanan: *“What benefit did you bring me?”*

<sup>v</sup> Adapted from Steinsaltz translation



חלש דעתיה דרבי יוחנן,  
חלש ריש לקיש ... נח  
נפשיה דרבי שמעון בן  
לקיש, והוה קא מצטער  
רבי יוחנן בתריה טובא.  
אמרו רבנן: מאן ליזיל  
ליתביה לדעתיה ניזיל  
רבי אלעזר בן פדת,  
דמחדדין שמעתתיה. אזל  
יטיב קמיה, כל מילתא  
דהוה אמר רבי יוחנן אמר  
ליה: תניא דמסייעא לך.  
אמר: את כבר לקישא?  
בר לקישא, כי הוה אמינא  
מילתא הוה מקשי לי  
עשרין וארבע קושייתא,  
ומפרקינא ליה עשרין  
וארבעה פרוקי, וממילא  
רווחא שמעתא. ואת  
אמרת תניא דמסייע לך,  
אטו לא ידענא דשפיר  
קאמינא?

*There, among the bandits, they called me leader, and here, too, they call me leader.”*

As a result of the quarrel, Rabbi Yochanan was offended, which in turn affected Reish Lakish, who fell ill and died. Rabbi Yochanan was sorely pained over losing him.

The sages said: *“Who will go to calm Rabbi Yochanan’s mind and comfort him over his loss? Let Rabbi Elazar ben-Pedat go, as his statements are sharp.”* Rabbi Elazar ben-Pedat went and sat before Rabbi Yochanan.

With regard to every matter that Rabbi Yochanan would say, Rabbi Elazar ben Pedat would say to him: *“Here is a point which supports your opinion.”*

Rabbi Yochanan said to him: *“Are you comparable to Reish Lakish? In my discussions with him, when I would state a matter, he would raise twenty-four contradictions in an attempt to disprove my claim, and I would answer him with twenty-four answers, and the law would become clear. And yet you say to me: ‘Here is a point which supports your opinion.’ Do I not know that what I say is good?”*

### Text 8: y.Demai 4:1, 24a

ר' בון בר חייא בעא  
קומי ר' זעירא ... על  
רבי חגיי אמרין כדין  
הוא מימר משה  
דאנא אמר טעמא  
אמ' משה דאנא אמר  
טעמא.

Rebbi Abun bar-Chiyya was studying with Rebbi Zeira. They came to a difficult point.

Just then, Rabbi Chaggai entered. Abun and Zeira said: “*Any moment now, he’ll say: ‘By Moses, I’ll explain this to you!’*”

Rabbi Chaggai said: “*By Moses, I’ll explain this to you!*”

### ECCENTRICITY

#### Text 9: b.Pesachim 112b

אמר רב: ניזהא דתורא — הן הן,  
ניזהא דאריה — זה זה, ניזהא  
דגמלא — דא דא, ניזהא דארבא  
— הילני הייא הילא והילוק  
הוליא.

Rav taught:

The cry of an ox<sup>vi</sup> is: “*Heyn heyn!*” The cry of a lion is: “*Zeh zeh!*”  
The cry of a camel is: “*Da da!*” The cry of a sailor is: “*Yo heave ho!*”<sup>vii</sup>

<sup>vi</sup> Rashi, sv ‘Nizha d’tora’, suggests that these are noises one is advised to make to, rather than noises made by, those animals and mariners listed.

<sup>vii</sup> Literally: “*Heleni, hayya, hela, vehilook, hulya!*”

## Text 10: b.Berachot 62a<sup>viii</sup>

בן עזאי אומר: פעם אחת  
נכנסתי אחר רבי עקיבא לבית  
הכסא, ולמדתי ממנו שלשה  
דברים: למדתי שאין נפנין  
מזרח ומערב אלא צפון ודרום,  
ולמדתי שאין נפרעין מעומד  
אלא מיושב, ולמדתי שאין  
מקנחין בימין אלא בשמאל.  
אמר לו רבי יהודה: עד כאן  
העזת פניך ברבך! - אמר לו:  
תורה היא וללמוד אני צריך. רב  
כהנא על, גנא תותיה פורייה  
דרב. שמעיה דשח ושחק ועשה  
צרכיו, אמר ליה: דמי פומיה  
דאבא כדלא שריף תבשילא!  
אמר לו: כהנא, הכא את? פוק,  
דלאו ארח ארעא. אמר לו:  
תורה היא וללמוד אני צריך.

Ben-Azzai said: “I once entered a bathroom after my teacher Rabbi Akiva, and I learned three things. I learned that one should not defecate while facing east and west, but rather while facing north and south; I learned that one should not uncover himself while standing, but while sitting; and I learned that one should not wipe with his right hand, but with his left.”

Rabbi Yehuda said to him: “You were impertinent to your teacher to that extent?” Ben-Azzai replied: “It is Torah, and I must learn.”

Rav Kahana entered Rav’s room and hid under his bed. He heard Rav chatting and laughing with his wife, and seeing to his needs. Rav Kahana said to Rav: “Go on, my son!”<sup>ix</sup>

Rav said to him: “Kahana, what are you doing here?! Leave, as this is an undesirable mode of behaviour.” Rav Kahana said to him: “It is Torah, and I must learn.”

<sup>viii</sup> Adapted from Steinsaltz translation

<sup>ix</sup> A loose and idiomatic translation.

## LOOKING BACK

### Text 11: Professor Mara H Benjamin<sup>x</sup>

The ultimate test of the success for all Torah lies in its ability to become embodied in a human being, and in the possibility of a disciple ‘reading’ the text that his master embodies.

<sup>x</sup> Mara H Benjamin, “On teachers, rabbinic and maternal”, in Marjorie Lehman, Jane L Kanarek and Simon J Bronner (eds), *Mothers in the Jewish Cultural Imagination* (Liverpool: Littman Library of Jewish Civilisation, 2017), 359–376: 371.

# WACKY TEXTS

## PART 5 – THE LIFE OF JESUS



## TOL'DOT YESHU<sup>i</sup>

### Foetus: version 1

The beginning of the creation of Yeshu: his mother Miriam descended from Israel, and she had a fiancé of royal blood, from the house of David. His name was Yochanan. He knew scripture well and was a very God-fearing man.

And next to Miriam's door, across the street, there was a good-looking man named Yosef. One night, on Sabbath's eve, he passed by her door while he was drunk. He came inside, and she thought in her heart that he was her fiancé Yochanan. She said to him: *"Do not touch me, because I am menstruating,"* but he was not alarmed and did not pay attention to her words. He lay with her, and she conceived from him.

In the middle of the night, her fiancé Rabbi Yochanan came. She said to him: *"What is this? It never was (your) custom from the day of our betrothal to come to me twice in one night."* He responded to her and said: *"Now is the first time I come to you in this night."* She said to him: *"You came to me and I said to you, 'I am menstruating,' but you were not alarmed, you fulfilled your desire and went away."* As he heard this, he immediately understood that Yosef ben-Pandera put an eye on her and did this.

After a while, there went a rumour that Miriam was pregnant. Her fiancé Yochanan said: *"Not from me she conceived. If I remain here, I would hear my disgrace from the people every day."* He got up and went to Babylonia.

<sup>i</sup> This is a mash-up and very slight adaptation of various recensions of the text, as compiled and translated by Michael Meerson and Peter Schäfer (eds), *Toledot Yeshu: the life story of Jesus* (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2014).

## Foetus: version 2

Behold, in the reign of Herod the Proselyte, there was a man named Pappos ben-Yehudah, and he had a wife whose name was Miriam. She was of extraordinary beauty, and she was from the tribe of Benyamin. Her husband Pappos would not allow her to go outside his house, and closed the door for her sake, saying: *“Lest the villains would whore with her.”*

And on the Yom Kippur fast, the villain Yosef Pandera ha-Notzri passed by her window, and he was handsome, and, seeing that no one was at her home, he raised his voice and shouted to her: *“Miriam, Miriam, for how long will you be locked up?”* She bent over the window and answered him: *“Yosef, Yosef, save me!”* Yosef went and fetched a ladder, and Miriam went out through the window. They both fled from Jerusalem to Bethlehem on the Yom Kippur fast, and they lived in Bethlehem for many days, and no one recognised them. And Yosef lay with Miriam on the Yom Kippur fast and she conceived.

### Child: version 1

His mother hired a teacher for him, and he was intelligent and studied both scripture and Talmud. And the students of the sages had a custom that neither a boy nor a young man might walk in the street with his head uncovered. One day, that villain passed in the street with a proud stature and his head uncovered in front of our rabbis. When he passed by, one of them said: "*A bastard he is.*" The second said: "*A bastard and the son of a menstruating woman.*"

The rabbis were expounding legal problems and were looking for their solutions. And if a student expounded a problem, then the rabbi proposed to them a solution, but this villain Yeshu proposed a solution without his rabbi's consent. One student said to him: "*Even if I knew the solution, I would not have spoken in front of the rabbi.*"

### Child: version 2

Yeshu ha-Notzri was arrogant since the time he knew how to speak. And he was devious, deceiving and contentious, and he made himself a name in foul language. And he spoke ill of the prophets and scripture learners, and he conducted himself with jealousy, lust and self-honour. He desired mightiness. He said that scripture and all its commandments are already annulled, and he said that he was the King Messiah that all the prophets prophesied about, and that regarding him the prophet said: *Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and you shall call his name Emmanuel (Isaiah 7:14)*. And the proof that he had is that he did not have a father.

### Child: version 3

In those days, the court was judging the nation's cases, and they were perverting the judgments with bribery and with favouritism. And Yeshu ha-Notzri was sitting there. Once



he rebuked them regarding a righteous person who they were menacing. He surpassed them in the argument. And they had enough of him and were searching for a pretext for distancing him from his position amongst them.

The court called Miriam, his mother. They made her swear by the Divine Name, saying: “*Tell us, this young man, whose son is he?*” On account of her greatly advanced age, she feared the oath by the Divine Name and told the court what happened.

When Yeshu returned from the village, he came to sit in his customary place. The court arose and drove him out. They said to him: *A bastard shall not enter the congregation of God (Deuteronomy 23:2).*

### **Spiritual leader**

In the Temple, there was the Foundation Stone on which the letters of the Ineffable Name were written. Everyone who learned them could do whatever they wanted, and the sages were afraid that the youngsters of Israel might learn them and destroy the world with them. They, therefore, had made an arrangement for this matter, so that they would not be able to learn: copper dogs suspended from two iron columns of the central gate, who would make anyone leaving the building forget the letters.

Yeshu came and read the letters, and wrote them on parchment. He then cut his thigh and put the parchment inside it, and pronounced those letters, so that his wounded flesh would not hurt. Then, he returned his flesh to its place. When he left the Temple, the copper dogs were barking at him and the letters escaped his memory. He went home and cut open his flesh with a knife, retrieve the parchment, and learned the letters.

Then Yeshu went and assembled 310 young men of Israel. He said to them: *“Look, those who call me the bastard son of a menstruating woman, they desire greatness for themselves, and they seek to dominate in Israel. Do you not see that all prophets prophesied about the Messiah of God? And I am the Messiah!”*

The young men answered him: *“If you are the Messiah, show us a sign.”* They brought to him a cripple that never stood on his feet. He pronounced over him the letters, and he got up on his feet. At that moment, everyone fell prostrate before him and said: *“This is the Messiah!”* The villains of his folk gathered around him.

The elders of Israel went and chose one man whose name was Yehudah Iskariota, and led him to the Holy of Holies, and he learned the letters of the Ineffable Name that were hewn on the Foundation Stone, and Yehudah wrote them on a small parchment, cut his thigh, said the Ineffable Name, so that it would not hurt, as Yeshu had done in the beginning.

### **Aviator**

Yeshu raised his hands like the wings of an eagle and was flying, and the people were amazed at how he flew between the heaven and the earth. The sages of Israel said to Yehudah Iskariota: *“You too mention the letters and ascend after him!”* Yehudah immediately did so, and flew up to the sky. Neither of them was able to defeat the other, because they were trying to cast each other to the ground with help of the Ineffable Name while both of them were in possession of the Ineffable Name. When Yehudah realised this, he urinated on Yeshu and touched his erect penis and defiled Yeshu a second time with semen, and Yeshu was polluted and fell to the ground.

## Captive

The sages brought Yeshu to the synagogue in Tiberias and tied him to a pillar before the ark. And when the faction of fools and the erring ones who believed in him gathered and saw that Yeshu did not have the ability to run away from the sages, they put on his head a crown of thorns and the villains started to cry, and there was a war in Israel between brother and brother and between father and son. And the sages and elders overcame the villains, and defeated them.

They sentenced Yeshu to death. Yeshu gave his voice up to weeping and said: “*Concerning me, David my forefather prophesied: For your sake we are killed all day long (Psalm 44:23).*”

# WACKY TEXTS

## PART 6 – THE DEATH OF JESUS



## TOL'DOT YESHU<sup>i</sup>

### Fugitive

When Yeshu's disciples and his band of villains heard about his capital sentence, they delivered up their souls to death and fought the elders of Jerusalem and the sages, and they smuggled Yeshu outside of the city. Yeshu hurried and went down to the Jordan River and he immersed and purified himself. He unfurled the Name and did signs like before. Moreover, he went and took two millstones and floated them upon the waters, and he sat on them and fished before his faction, and they ate.

The report came to Jerusalem, and the pietists and the sages mourned. They said: *"Who is the man who will place his life in his hands and go and remove the Great Name from that bastard son of a menstruating woman? Behold, we are guarantors for him, to bring him to life in the World to Come!"* And Yehudah said: *"I will go."* He went and disguised himself among those villains. And it happened at midnight that God cast a deep sleep upon that bastard because Yehudah had adjured the angel who rules over sleep. Then, Yehudah came to the tent of the bastard, and he took his knife and cut the flesh of Yeshu, and he took out from him the power of the holy writing.

Then he went out from them secretly to the elders of the city and its sages. Yehudah told them all that was done and how he removed the Name from that bastard. They were very happy, and Yehudah said to them: *"I will deliver that bastard into your hands by this time tomorrow."* The sages said to him: *"Do you know his goings and comings?"* Yehudah said to

<sup>i</sup> This is a mash-up and very slight adaptation of various recensions of the text, as compiled and translated by Michael Meerson and Peter Schäfer (eds), *Toledot Yeshu: the life story of Jesus* (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2014).

them: *“Behold, he will come at this time tomorrow to the Temple to offer the Pesach sacrifice. With him will be two thousand men, all of them wearing identical garments. And you, arm yourselves for tomorrow; the man before whom I will prostrate and bend down, he is that bastard. Do as men of war; fight against his band and seize him!”*

All of the sages and the elders rejoiced with great joy, and they agreed to act according to words of Yehudah. And it happened on the next day that Yeshu came with all of his band, and Yehudah went out before him and bent down and prostrated himself to him, with his face to the ground. The men of Jerusalem were armed and girded, and they seized Yeshu.

### **Death row inmate**

And that day was Pesach eve and Sabbath eve. They brought him to the place of stoning, and they stoned him with stones and he died. The sages said to hang him on a tree, but the tree would not bear him; rather, it broke under him. Yeshu’s disciples saw this and wept, and they said: *“See the righteousness of our lord Yeshu that no tree will bear him!”*

Yehudah saw that no tree would receive him, and he said to the sages: *“Know that that bastard adjured all the trees while the Name was still in his hands so they would not bear him. Behold, there is in my garden a big cabbage stalk; I will go and bring it. Perhaps it will bear him.”* The sages said: *“Go, do as you said.”* Yehudah ran and brought the stalk, and they hanged Yeshu on it.

## Corpse

After that, they buried. And it happened that on that night, his disciples gathered and wept on his grave. Yehudah heard and said to himself: *“Maybe they will steal him and will make a false claim, saying he ascended to heaven.”* He disguised himself again, and came into their midst, and wept a wanton cry. Immediately after everyone had left, Yehudah took the corpse from its grave, took it to his house, and buried Yeshu under an aqueduct, and put a stone on him and placed trees on top of the stone, and he did not reveal the matter to his family.

And Yeshu’s disciples discovered that the grave was open and the corpse was gone. They fell on their faces, and screamed a bitter cry: *“The Jews killed the Messiah, a righteous man, foundation of the world.”*

Yehudah ran to his garden and took out the corpse and tied the strands of Yeshu’s hair to the tail of a horse. And he dragged out the corpse to the city street, yelling: *“See Yeshu and his end.”* Everyone walked after the corpse, and the young men cursed and mocked him. Young men took dog excrement and put it in his mouth. And in memory of this, monks distribute disgusting bread.

## Aftermath

And it happened after these matters that a quarrel developed between the Christians and the Jews, not that they can be equated! For when a Christian saw a Jew, they killed them. And the trouble continued to get more severe for thirty years. The Christians gathered together in thousands and tens of thousands, and they prevented Israel from going up to Jerusalem for the pilgrimage festivals. There was as great a trouble in Israel as on the day when the golden calf was made, and they did not know what to do, but their faith continued to get stronger.

One elder stood up, and his name was Shimon Kefa. He said to them: *“Hearken to me my brothers and my people! If my words seem good in your eyes, I will separate these evil men from the community of the children of Israel.”* And Shimon Kefa went into the Inner Sanctuary and wrote down the Great Name. He tore his flesh and placed the writing within it; then he went out from the Temple, took out the writing and learned the Name.

He went to the city of the Christians, shouted in a loud voice and said: *“Everyone who has faith in Yeshu, let them come to me, for I am his messenger.”* They came to him in numbers as great as the grains of sand on the seashore. They said to him: *“Give us a sign that you are his messenger.”* He said to them: *“What sign do you request from me?”* They said to him: *“The signs that Yeshu did during his life, you also do for us.”* He said to them: *“Bring me a leper!”* They brought one to him, and he laid his hand on him, and behold, he was healed. He said to them further: *“Bring me a corpse!”* They brought one before him, and he laid his hand on him, and he lived and stood on his feet. These evil men saw this, and they fell before him to the earth and said to him: *“Truly you are a messenger of Yeshu, for he did thusly for us in his life!”*



Shimon Kefa said to them: *“I am Yesu’s messenger, and he commanded me to go to you. Swear to me that you will do everything that I command you. Know that the one who was hanged hated Israel, but know further that he does not desire Israel, as Hosea said, For you are not my people (Hosea 1:9). Although he is able to uproot them from the world in a single moment, he does not want to destroy them. So now, he warns you and commands you not to continue to do any evil to any Jew. If a Jew strikes a Christian on the left cheek, turn to them also the right cheek, so that they shall use up their reward in this world and in the World to Come they will be stored away for affliction in hell.”*

They said: “As you said, so shall we do.” They built him a tower, and they gave the tower to him as a residence, and gave him a daily ration of bread and water until the day of his death. He dwelt within it and served the God of our fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and he wrote a great many liturgical poems, and he sent them throughout all of the lands of the Israelites in order that they might be a memorial to him in every generation.

Shimon dwelt in the tower for six years and then he died. They entombed him in the tower, and they did so. Afterwards, they built an ugly building on it, and this tower still stands in Rome. And they call him Peter. This is the word for ‘rock’, for he sat there on a rock until the day of his death.

# WACKY TEXTS

## PART 7 – FROM THE RESPONSA LITERATURE



## IT'S A GIRL!

### Text 1: Chatam Sofer, responsum Choshen Mishpat 176

גי"ה קבלתי ע"ד השוחט  
מיכאל ראב שוחט בכפר א'  
פגע באיש א' נכבד כה'  
מיכאל פשקז ... והתל בו  
שילדה אשתו של השוחט בן  
זכר ושמכבדו במצות מילת  
בנו באשר ידע המהתל ההוא  
כי הנכבד ר' מיכאל מהדר  
מאוד על מצוה זו וביום א'  
העבר נסע ר' מיכאל מהלך  
ארבעה שעות מקהלתו לכפר  
ההוא והנה שיקר בו ונקבה  
ילדה והי' לשחוק בעיני כל  
ונפשו בשאלתו ... שואל אם  
יש להעביר השוחט מאומנתו  
על מעשה הנ"ל או מה  
לעשות לו ... אין לנו רשות  
ממלכות לנדות ואמנם מדינא  
הנידוי לגרשו מבה"כ ושלא  
למול את בנו ... ומכ"ש  
דאיכא עלי' רשעת לאו דלא  
תונו פשיטא שיכולים  
להעבירו מאומנתו עד  
שיפייס את שכנגדו בכל מה

From the pure hand of my correspondent, I received information regarding the slaughterer Michael Raab, a shochet in a certain village, who deceived a certain respected man, the honourable rabbi Michael Pashkiz.

Raab mocked Rabbi Michael, claiming that Raab's wife had given birth to a male child and that he was honouring Rabbi Michael by inviting him to perform the mitzvah of circumcising his son – for the mocker knew that the esteemed Rabbi Michael is extremely meticulous about this mitzvah. On the previous Sunday, Rabbi Michael travelled a four-hour journey from his community to Raab's village – and behold, it turned out to be false; a female had been born, and he had become a laughingstock in everyone's eyes. He is anguished and has submitted a question accordingly, asking whether the shochet should be removed from his post due to this matter, or what should be done to him.

Now, the state does not permit us to excommunicate him. If we could, that would involve barring him from the synagogue and not allowing him to have any future sons circumcised.

However, since he has wickedly transgressed the commandment *Do not mistreat your fellow (Leviticus 25:17)*, it is obvious that we

שראוי' ... ולקבל תשובתו על  
חוצפתו ולא של אונאה ועד  
אז אני מסכים להעבירו אם  
קבלו ב"ד טענת הצדדי'  
ואמתלאותם וימצא את  
השוחט חייב ... כל זה כתבתי  
בחפזי הכ"ד א"נ. פ"ב יום ב'  
ער"ח ניסן תקצ"ה לפ"ק.  
משה"ק סופר מפפד"מ.

can remove Raab from his position as shochet until he has (i)  
appeased Rabbi Michael to the full extent of the law, and (ii)  
repented for his chutzpah, and his transgression of a  
commandment. Until that happens, I agree to remove him from  
office, assuming that the beit din finds the facts to be as pleaded.

All this I have written in haste. I hereby sign, Monday, the eve of  
Rosh Chodesh Nissan 5595 [March 23, 1835], Moshe Sofer of  
Pressburg.

## I FOUGHT THE LAW AND THE LAW WON

### Text 2: Beit Yehudah, responsum Choshen Mishpat 18<sup>i</sup>

ראובן ושמעון שיש לכל א' סוס  
... ואז נתתו שניהם באופן זה  
אתה תניח לי סוסך יום זה  
לטעון עליו עם שלי ומחר אתנהו  
לך בסוסי בסוסך דהיינו שעשו  
חליפין יום כנגד יום ועשו  
כדבריהם והתחיל ראובן ביום א'  
וטען על סוסו וסוס חבירו משא  
סאין של חטים כשיעור הידוע  
ויהי ממחר' ולקחם שמעון גם  
הוא ועשה כמוהו ואז בחזרתם  
לגורן שלח ראובן שלוחו למקום  
יישוב שמעון להביא לו סוסו כי  
כבר נגמר חליפיהם ויהי כאשר  
בא שלוחו ורצה להוליך הסוס  
למקומו אז בא עכו"ם אחד שהוא  
גדול ושר של אותו מקו' אשר  
חונה עליו שמעון ותפס הסוס  
לשאת עליו לצורכו ולא הניחו  
שמעון ואעפ"כ תקף בו העכו"ם  
והוליכו וטען עליו יותר ממשאו  
הרגיל ועיקם עליו את הדרך

**SH'EILAH:** Reuben and Shim'on each had a horse. The two of them then arranged in this manner: *"You will leave me your horse today to carry my load together with my horse, and tomorrow I will give you my horse to use together with your horse."* That is to say, they made a deal exchanging one day for one day. They did as they had agreed, and Reuben began the first day. He carried on his horse and that of his friend a measure load of wheat in the standard amount.

The next day Shim'on took them and did the same thing. When they returned to the granary, Reuben sent someone to the place Shim'on was staying to bring his horse back home, because their arrangement was over.

However, just as Reuben's agent prepared to bring the horse back home, a certain non-Jew showed up, an important man who was governor of the area where Shim'on was dwelling. He grabbed the horse in order to carry his own things. Shim'on tried to prevent him, but the non-Jew struck him and led it away. The governor loaded the horse with more than it was

<sup>i</sup> Translation of the sh'eilah from Matt Goldish, *Jewish Questions: responsa on Sephardic life in the early modern period* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008): 16-17.

והלך הסוס למקו' קשה ונפל  
ומת ועתה באו לדין ראובן טוען  
כי שמעון פושע שנתנו לעכו"ם  
וחייב לשלם שאע"פי שהעכו"ם  
תפסו מעצמו ושמעון לא הניחו  
מ"מ היה לו למנעו על צד הדחק  
ויתקוטט עמו כפי יכולתו עד  
שלא ימצא לו מקום. ושמעון  
טוען שלאחר שבא השליח  
להוליכו הרי נסתלק משמירתו  
וברשות השליח עומד ... מהו  
הדין בזה.

תשובה ... בנדון דידן כפי נוסח  
השאלה שבא שלוחו של ראובן  
להוליך בהמתו הרי נסתלקה  
שמירת שמעון וחשיבה כבאה  
ליד ראובן.

## A WHOLE NEW WELD

### Text 3: Maharam Alshich, responsum 57<sup>ii</sup>

שאלה ילמדנו רבינו האלמנה לאה  
בחיי בעלה היתה יודעת אומנות  
האזירו לעשות אותו מברזל ואיש  
אין בכל הארץ שידעוהו והשתדל'  
להוציא מאמר מהמלך יר"ה שתהא

accustomed to carry and took it along a crooked path. The horse got into a hard spot, fell, and died.

Reuben has now come to file suit, claiming that Shim'on was negligent for giving the horse to that non-Jew, and he must pay. For, even though the non-Jew grabbed it unprovoked, and Shim'on did try to prevent him, he should have responded more forcefully and fought him as hard as he could until there was no more he could do.

Shim'on claims that, since Reuben's agent had come to return the horse, his responsibility had ended, and it was now in the control of the agent. What is the law in this case?

**T'SHUVAH:** In a case like this, when Reuben's agent has arrived to lead the animal away, it is clear that Shim'on's responsibility has ended, and the animal has returned to Reuben's possession.

**SH'EILAH:** Instruct us, our teacher. Leah, during the lifetime of her husband, had learned the art of welding, which she would do with steel, and there was no other person in the land who knew how. She tried to obtain a license from the

<sup>ii</sup> Translation of the sh'eilah from Goldish, *ibid*: 27-28.

יכולה לעשות זה האומנות ביען היו  
אומרים שהיה הדבר זיוף וכאשר  
נתאלמנה הוצרכה ללמדו לראובן  
בסוד באופן לא יצא הדבר לשלישי  
וביען פחדה שמא ראובן יקח מעות  
מאחר לשליש ולרביע ויעשה  
האומנות בפני עצמו ויגיע לה מזה  
היזק השביעו על ככה שלא יוכל  
הוא לעשות זה האומנות עם שום  
יהודי או ארמאי ... באופן שעקר  
הכוונה שזה האומנות לא ימצא  
בשום מקום כ"א בשניהם בלבד  
ועתה ראובן הוא עושה בפני עצמו  
עם אחרים יורונו רבותינו מה משפט  
האיש.

תשובה ... נר' שאינה מתרעמת אלא  
להיותו עושה עם אחרים שנראה  
שם היה עושה לבדו הוה ניחא לה.

sultan (may he be raised up!) to practice this craft, since there were those who claimed it was really feigned. When she was widowed, she was forced to teach it to Reuben as a secret that could never be allowed to reach a third party. She feared that he might accept investments from additional persons and work at the craft for himself, thus causing harm to her, so she put him under oath that he would not be allowed to practice this trade with any other Jew or Aleppan. The essential intention was that this craft should be found nowhere except with these two. Now, however, Reuben has gone into business for himself, together with others. Tell us, teacher, how we should judge this man.

**T'SHUVAH:** It seems to me that Reuben has only wronged Leah in that he practised this craft with others. It appears that, had he practised it as a sole trader, he would not be liable to her at all.

## WHAT'S IN A NAME?

### Yabia Omer 2, responsum Yoreh De'ah 15

עמדתי ואתבונן אם מותר לבן לקרוא לאביו ששמו אבא, בתואר אבא. או יש לאסור משום שנראה כקורא לאביו בשמו. וכמו כן היאך הדין נוטה בת"ח ששמו רבינו, אם מותר לתלמידיו לתארו בתואר רבינו. או ג"כ יש לחוש שנראה כקוראים לו בשמו ... תלמיד מותר לקרוא לרבו רבינו ... אע"פ שכן שמו. אלא שהואיל ואפשר לתאר את רבו בתאר אדוני או רבי, טוב לעשות כן, כדי שינצל מכל חשד, דדמי לקורא לרבו בשמו ... אפשר להקל. והמחמיר תע"ב. והיעב"א.

It occurred to me to ponder whether it is permissible for one whose father's name is Abba to call him "Abba", or whether it is forbidden because it appears as though they are calling their father by name. And similarly, what is the position concerning a Torah scholar whose name is Rabbeinu? May his students refer to him with the title "*Rabbeinu*", or is there a similar concern that it appears as if they are calling him by his name?

A student is permitted to call their teacher "*Rabbeinu*" even though that is his name. However, since it is possible to refer to a teacher with the title "*Adoni*" or "*Rabbi*", it is better to do so, in order that the student be saved from any suspicion, as it resembles calling their teacher by name. But one may be lenient. And one who is stringent, may they be blessed. And that is the humble opinion of the author.



# WACKY TEXTS

## PART 8 – FROM THE YIDDISH PRESS



## AN EXCITABLE RACE<sup>i</sup>

It was a hot June 27, 1906, when the Jewish volcano on the Lower East Side erupted, spitting forth 50,000 furious immigrant mothers. Descending on the neighbourhood's public schools en masse, an enraged army of Yiddisha mamas demanded to see their children after a rumour spread that doctors from the New York City Board of Health were in the schools slashing their children's throats.

Greeted by locked doors, the screaming throngs encircled the school buildings and set to pounding on doors and smashing windows. The kids inside were baffled.

On Essex Street some white-hot Jewish mothers clambered up ladders they'd brought with them in an attempt to break into a school through the second-floor windows. During the rampage, gangs of immigrants cursed out principals, fought police, and attacked anyone in the street bearing the slightest resemblance to a doctor – and this meant anyone wearing spectacles. Some of them raided vegetable pushcarts for ammunition, whereas others posed more serious threats, such as one young man who cornered a member of the Board of Health and pulled a revolver on him.

Just what was going on here? Word had spread like wildfire among the Jews of the Lower East Side that uptown doctors had come to downtown public schools and were, as described in the Yiddish daily *Di varhayt*, “cutting the throats of Jewish children”. After a two-hour

<sup>i</sup> Abridged from Eddy Portnoy, *Bad Rabbi and other strange but true stories from the Yiddish press* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2018): 67–72.

assault, the ragtag army achieved victory: their children were released early and alive, thereby proving that no such slaughter had taken place.

Twelve schools on the Lower East Side had to be shut down early on account of the chaos. Thrilled at having gotten a miraculous half-day's vacation, the children didn't even know what the ruckus was about. "*I dunno sir, I t'ink the school exploded,*" one boy told a reporter from the *Evening Post*. How is it that a simple rumour managed to upset so many thousands of mothers to the point where they besieged neighbourhood schools in fits of violence to demand their children?

As with many hysteria-inducing rumours, this one contained a kernel of truth. A week earlier, scores of Jewish students at an elementary school on the Lower East Side had been absent from school, prompting one school principal to propose the brilliant idea that, because the neighbourhood's immigrant children probably do not receive adequate medical care, they should probably undergo tonsillectomies. The thoughtful principal kindly arranged for doctors to come to the school and perform the operations locally. They performed eighty-three tonsillectomies.

But *Di varhayt* reported that not only did many of the young patients not even bother to get their parents' permission, but also they had been sent home with permission slips that their Yiddish-speaking parents did not understand and so they just signed the papers. Some of the children apparently even signed the slips themselves. All the parents knew was that when the children returned home from school after their procedures, they did so drooling mouthfuls of blood, barely able to speak. Shocked, their parents asked what happened. "*Doctors cut our throats,*" the children replied. Rumours of a wholesale slaughter began to

leap like wildfire throughout the tenements and sweatshops. As the gossip wended its way through the neighbourhood, the story ballooned from “*doctors cut our throats*” to “*two children died*” to a wild “*83 children died*”. Local street corner orators got into the act, screaming about the massacres in the schools, comparing them to the wave of pogroms that were then taking place in Poland, reports of which were all over the Yiddish papers. According to the *New York Sun*, 16-year-old Esther Blaustein was pulled off the back of a wagon and arrested for inflaming the crowd with a fiery Yiddish speech in which she claimed to have seen teachers killing children. Another street corner pontificator claimed to have seen teachers chopping children’s heads off. But, as the *New York Tribune* noted: “*One merit of the Yiddish mob is that it indulges more in vociferation than violence. It shrieks epithets without stint, hurls a few vegetables and breaks a few windows, but never destroys life and property in the style of Southern lynchers, striking mechanics, railway men, and mine workers.*”

On the other hand, the *New York World* reported the story of a telephone repairman who was observed by a phalanx of angry Jewesses with a pliers hanging from his tool belt. Someone in the crowd claimed he was a doctor and that his pliers were used to yank out the tongues of their little boys and girls. Within seconds, he was mobbed and beaten senseless. It took police from two different precincts to rescue him.

The Yiddish *Di varhayt* said that the fault lay with the Board of Health and the school’s principal for stupidly sending home permission slips that had not been translated into Yiddish. Nearly all the Yiddish papers decried the overwrought reaction of the mothers, but they understood why it happened.

In an attempt to place all the blame with the Lower East Side's Jews for the riot, both the *Tribune* and the *New York Times* alleged that a nefarious group of neighbourhood Jewish doctors had spread the rumour because they were furious that uptown doctors were performing tonsillectomies on local children for free, when they could be getting 50 cents a pop.

The *Tribune* also took the opportunity to bemoan the episode as one of a series of events that plagued the overcrowded and frequently obnoxious Jewish quarter. The implication was that the Jews were a people who would explode into an orgy of anarchy on a hair trigger; a whole neighbourhood of overly emotional, potentially violent immigrant women could easily detonate when things did not go their way. Although accurate in part, this assessment did not take into account the fact that Yiddish-speaking immigrants had neither the linguistic faculty nor the basic knowledge as to how to handle administrative issues through traditional conduits. Heading into the streets with your neighbours and a rolling pin was simply a more expeditious way of dealing with issues you had difficulty expressing in a new language.

The events in question – another feverish episode in a neighbourhood that exploded in fury every once in a while – were summed up quite nicely in the *Evening Post*, in which a local woman offered a simple explanation for the behaviour of the neighbourhood's women: “*We Jews are an excitable race.*”

## FALLING OUT OF LOVE<sup>ii</sup>

It is doubtlessly a tragedy when a marriage or a long-term relationship ripens into an angry knot of hatred and acrimony, when fury and venom are spit from lips that only recently touched in tender embrace. Horrible, unless, of course, you get to watch it happen. Such was the luck of the Yiddish journalists who were assigned to report from the Warsaw beyz-din, the city's rabbinic court, which functioned as a kind of Las Vegas-style divorce court where couples could show up without an appointment and request an instant divorce. With relationships unravelling and tensions running high, the proceedings would often devolve into pitched battles between appellants, in which chairs and fists would fly. And because litigants knew that journalists would be present to report on the cases, starting in the mid-1920s, the court began to take on the flavour of a Yiddish Jerry Springer show.

Most cases were initially vetted by the court's indefatigable clerk, Reb Dan, whose job it was to suss out whether petitioners had a legitimate case. Only after speaking to Reb Dan would litigants be allowed to plead their cases before the rabbis. It was common knowledge that Reb Dan, a clerical celebrity among all of Warsaw's Jews, would try to get litigants to mediate and settle their cases beforehand, instead of having them come to trial before the rabbis. His ability to settle these disputes was so legendary that one reporter facetiously announced that Reb Dan had won the Nobel Peace Prize. Not only did he mediate legal disputes, but also on numerous occasions he was forced to intervene and negotiate between angry groups of witnesses, spectators and the rabbis of the court. Sadly, no one today has heard of Reb Dan. Like most of Polish Jewry, he simply disappeared into a historical void

<sup>ii</sup> Abridged from Portnoy, *ibid*: 147–174.

The reporters of the Yiddish press understood that divorce court was a guaranteed winner when it came to providing fodder for a sensational article. The Rabbinate found the reports of violence – usually accompanied by quotes such as “*and the rabbis crept out through a side door*” – abhorrent and terribly embarrassing. But the intrepid journalists of the Yiddish press continued to report on the constant barrage of beyz-din scandals.

The Warsaw Rabbinate created a special agunes department in 1928 that was supposed to deal with the problem. Their success was limited. But the press reports a different solution which came into being:





*“Among the patrons of the Rabbinate, one finds many women who cannot be considered to be among Reb Dan’s official guests but who may be called permanent residents. These are the unfortunate agunes – victims of the war, or of such men who left them and disappeared into the wide world, leaving them on the meat rack. Sitting there in the Rabbinate waiting room, they interest themselves in the situations of others. They sit and give advice to other women. They advise them on what to do and how to lodge complaints in the court in order to receive a better judgment for themselves. Zelda Piekarek, a skinny, greenish woman, like a lulav with a squeaky voice, begins to testify: ‘My mother warned me not to marry him. Now he beats me up and I’m black and blue all over my body...’ The agunes listen intelligently, like judges, and a few women help out with Zelda’s complaint.”*

### **THE KOSHER MEAT STRIKE<sup>iii</sup>**

On May 15, 1902, the Lower East Side’s Jewish housewives took to the streets in a meat-hurling frenzy. They were rebelling against a huge bump in the price of meat – from 12 to 18 cents a pound. The Meat Trust, a shadowy collective that supplied the city’s kosher meat, had jacked up wholesale costs. Local shops initially tried to protest; they stopped selling meat for a week. But the Meat Trust was unbending. Small businesses gave up the fight, agreeing to pass the price hike on to the consumer.

But local women would have none of it. The impetus to fight came from one Mrs Levy, the wife of a cloakmaker. She shouted: *“This is their strike? Look at the good it has brought! Now if women make a strike, then it will be a strike!”* That day, Mrs Levy and Mrs Edelson, a small restaurant owner, called a mass meeting to plan a boycott. All over the Lower East Side,

<sup>iii</sup> Abridged from Marjorie Ingall, “Lessons from the kosher meat boycott”, *Tablet* (6 May 2019): <<https://archive.ph/1KDHC>>



women began passing out Yiddish flyers illustrated with skulls and crossbones, urging: *“Eat no meat while the Trust is taking meat from the bones of your women and children.”*

The next morning, women began attacking butcher shops. They threw meat into the streets and stomped on it, broke windows, and yanked packages of beef out of customers’ hands. When one shopper protested that her sick husband needed red meat, an elderly religious woman snapped: *“A sick man can eat treyf meat.”* (True.)

The riots continued for days. Women visited their neighbours to sniff each other’s pots for meat. On Shabbat, they streamed out of the balconies during the Torah reading to bring attention to the cause. When a man told Mrs Silver, one of the women who led the synagogue protest, that she had chutzpah and her action was a a desecration of God’s name, she coolly replied that the Torah would pardon her. Women marched and shouted: *“We will not be silent; we will overturn the world,”* and called themselves *“soldiers in the great women’s war”*. Orthodox Jews and socialist-anarchists, who pretty much agreed on nothing, fought side by side.

The *New York Times* reported in horror that women, *“armed with sticks, vocabularies and well-sharpened nails”* attacked the police. *“Old shoes, brushes, combs, brooms, and every other imaginable portable article of household use rained down upon the pavement,”* the *Times* fretted. A policeman *“had an unpleasant moist piece of liver slapped in his face”*.

At least 70 women were arrested. The community went door to door raising bail money.

Eventually, male communal leaders decided to get involved. They had a meeting of their own and informed the women that they could now back off because the men would handle things. They published a flyer noting that “*brave and honest men are now aiding women*”.

Ultimately, the Meat Trust backed down. They lowered their prices; the butchers then dropped theirs down to a more reasonable 14 cents a pound.