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## Fire Symbolism in Late-Antique and Medieval Jewish Love Magic

Fire and burning are often mentioned in recipes and products of Jewish love magic in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages. This article interprets the motif of fire as a key symbol, exploring its different manifestations. The motif is expressed in three main forms: (a) burning as part of the magical practice, (b) appeal to supernatural entities whose names are related to fire and (c) use of fire metaphors. A comparison between these manifestations and fire symbolism in aggressive spells sheds light on some special characteristics of Jewish love magic.

Research on Jewish love magic typically comprises three categories of spells: those designed to plant love between the members of a couple (actual or potential); those designed to do the opposite, that is, to sow hate and separation between them; and finally, spells for “favor and grace”, which were intended to achieve the social affection of one or more persons, often a superior, like a judge or a dignitary.<sup>1</sup> The data on these spells is derived from two chief sources: recipe handbooks (grimoires) on the one hand, and finished products, mainly textual amulets, on the other. Most of the amulets originate in the extraordinary trove of the Cairo Genizah, a collection of 300,000 documents spanning nearly a millennium, which was retrieved from the storage room of the Ben Ezra synagogue in Cairo.<sup>2</sup>

A survey of Jewish love magic in Late Antiquity and the medieval period reveals that over thirty percent of its items include references to fire in one form or another, for instance, in the names of the supernatural entities invoked in the spells, or in a concrete form, meaning that the magical practice involved burning certain ingredients. This percentage is

so significant that the fire motif deserves a thorough analysis.

To understand it better, one may resort to modern anthropology. The term “key symbol”, coined by anthropologist Sherry Ortner in the seventies of the past century, may illuminate the importance of the fire motif in Jewish love magic.<sup>3</sup> At least two of the characteristics which, according to Ortner, define a key symbol, are exhibited by the motif of fire in the present context. So far, however, there has been no attempt to apply such analyses to the field of Jewish magic, perhaps due to the fact that magic was not regarded as a complete cultural system, worthy of investigating methodically. Ortner claims that X may be defined as a key symbol if: “X comes up in many different contexts. These contexts may be behavioral or systemic. X comes up in many different kinds of action, situation or conversation, or X comes up in many different symbolic domains (myth, ritual, art, formal rhetoric, etc.)” Secondly, “There is greater cultural elaboration surrounding X, e.g., elaboration of vocabulary, or elaboration of details of X’s nature, compared with similar phenomena in the culture.”<sup>4</sup>

In what follows I will discuss the motif of fire as a key symbol in Jewish love magic, from Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages. If one regards magic as part and parcel of the culture in which it was created and used, it becomes clear why those key symbols may be regarded as relevant. This motif is usually manifested in magical items for generating love, grace and hate in the following ways:

a. A practical use of fire as part of the magical praxis: burning various materials or writing a text and casting it into flames.

b. An appeal to supernatural entities related to fire, for instance the angels Nuriel, Dalqiel and Shalhaviel, whose names may be translated as “Fire-el”, “Blaze-iel” and “Inflame-iel”. This manifestation of the motif is the lesser one of the three. Surprisingly, there are not many instances where a clear connection can be established between the nomenclature of supernatural entities and their intended task in Jewish love magic. Consequently, my article will not discuss this aspect further.

c. Lastly, the manifestation that is the focus of this article, is the use of fire and burning metaphors. These may be divided into analogical metaphors (“as this shard burns, so shall burn the heart of so-and-so”) and poetic metaphors (“Many waters cannot quench love”).

Occasionally, the same magical recipe may employ the motif of fire in more than one form. A good example is found in a Genizah fragment of a medieval magic handbook, currently preserved in the Cambridge University Library.<sup>5</sup> A love-inducing recipe written in a mixture of Aramaic and Judaeo-Arabic (Arabic written with Hebrew letters) begins by instructing the practitioner to inscribe a text on a piece of pottery and throw it into the flames – that is, a practical use of fire.<sup>6</sup> Next, the angel adjured in the recipe is Nuriel (*nur* meaning fire), who is supposed to kindle the heart of the spell target: “Take light from your light and fire from your fire and burn the heart of N son/daughter of N”. Lastly, the formula to be inscribed on the potsherd contains an analogical metaphor: “As this shard burns, so shall burn the heart of NN after NN”. In what follows I will examine some practical manifestations of the fire motif, after which I will proceed to discuss fire metaphors and their use in Jewish love magic.

### Practical use of fire

Jewish love magic contains a significant number of recipes that require inscribing a text on a particular surface and then casting it into flames. A very early example can be found in the Hebrew magic manual *The Book of Mysteries (Sefer Ha-Razim)*, approximately dated to the fourth century CE. In a recipe intended to place “the love of a man in a woman’s heart, or to make a poor man take a rich woman”, the practitioner is instructed:

Take two copper tablets and write upon them the names of

these angels on both sides, the name of the man and the name of the

woman, and say thus (...)

And place one (tablet) in a fiery furnace and one in her (ritual?) bath<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, a very popular practice, especially among Cairo Genizah recipes, employs a piece of unbaked clay as a writing surface. After inscribing it with a formula, usually demanding to burn the heart of the spell target, the clay is thrown into a furnace or other source of fire. Consequently, the clay hardens and the inscription on it becomes indelible. In other words, the material undergoes a one-way transformation, as presumably the emotions of the

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target should have. This practice can be shown to go back to late-antique Palestine, since an artifact based on such a recipe – that is, a burnt potsherd inscribed for love purposes – was uncovered in archaeological excavations. It is in fact the earliest product of Jewish love magic to be discovered thus far: a potsherd measuring ca. 8.5×8.5cm, broken into five pieces, and inscribed with an Aramaic text.<sup>8</sup> It was uncovered in a debris layer near the synagogue of Horvat Rimmon in southern Israel, and is dated to the fifth or sixth century CE. A short text was incised on the wet clay, which was then tossed into a fire, as indicated both by the text and by the black burning marks preserved on its surface. The fragments were uncovered close to the remains of two kilns, which is where the magical practice may have taken place. The name of the spell beneficiary was not preserved, but we do know that the name of the spell target, the woman whose love he sought to obtain, was Rachel daughter of Marian. The reconstructed text begins by appealing to a series of supernatural entities, and reads:

You holy angels [...],

I adjure you just as this shard

burns (in the fire) so shall burn the heart of Rachel daughter

of Marian? after me, I [...]

Other recipes calling for a practical use of fire employ an egg as a writing surface. Throwing the egg into flames, of course, results in exactly the opposite of the previous set of practices, because it destroys the text rather than securing it. Such recipes demand, for example:

Take an egg that was born on Thursday

from a black hen and bake the egg,

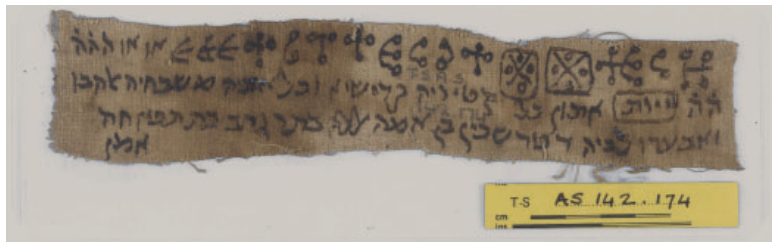
and remove its upper shell, and write on the egg this: *dwng dg dwng*

and burn it, and say: 'As this egg is burning so should burn

the heart of N daughter of N'<sup>9</sup>

Another “destructive” practice of this sort employs a piece of cloth, which should be inscribed with a text, turned into candle wicks, and burned:

For a woman, that she may love, he should make from [...] wicks on her name, and other wicks on your name, and fill a jar with oil when the new moon is out, and place the wicks inside the jar, and light them, and say: 'I adjure you, holy angels, who are appointed over love, that you should place the love of N son/daughter of N in the heart of N son/daughter of N, and she will love him a full love, and may her heart burn after him just as these wicks burn, and she shall run and fulfill the desire of N son/daughter of N<sup>10</sup>



Inscribed cloth, probably meant to be burned as a lamp wick, but never used as such. The Aramaic text requests to kindle and burn the heart of a man named Trshkin son of Ama-Allah for a woman named Gadab daughter of Tufaha. Cairo Genizah manuscript T-S AS 142.174. Reproduced by kind permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library.

The type of burning practices described so far are not exclusive to Jewish love magic, and they may also be found in polytheistic, Christian, and Islamic contexts. We may conclude by noting that the practical use of fire was a practice of sympathetic magic: the burning of a specific ingredient

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was supposed to influence reality in a similar manner. However, this also entailed a metaphorical aspect: burning the heart of the spell target—as specified in the formulae, which had to be inscribed or uttered—was not a physical act, but a figurative one.

### Metaphorical use of fire

A conceptual association between fire and love may be found in numerous traditions and periods. James Frazer, who devoted several sections of his monumental opus *The Golden Bough* to this issue, described the modes in which various cultures related the kindling of fire to sexual relations and fertility, especially when fire was started by rubbing a wood stick placed inside another wooden piece (a bow drill). This association of fire with eroticism may be regarded as a conceptual metaphor, that is, a metaphor which allows us to think – and consequently to talk about – one concept by using another concept. For instance, the conceptual metaphor “MONEY IS LIQUID” can be found in terms such as “cash flow”, “liquidity problems” or “to pour money into something”. In cognitive linguistics these two parts of a metaphor are designated as “target domain” and “source domain”. Thus, in the above example, “money” is the target domain, and it is represented by the term “liquid”, which is the source domain.<sup>11</sup>

The conceptual metaphor “LOVE IS FIRE” is exemplified by the magical texts mentioned above and is also found in modern slang expressions such as “he is hot”. This metaphor relies on an experiential basis: when we experience love it is often accompanied by an increased heart rate, followed by a rise in body heat, and blushing. From here, the conceptual association between love and fire follows easily. Nevertheless, there are also conceptual metaphors where the target domain is “love”, but the source domains are not related to fire. For example, the metaphor “LOVE IS WAR”, found in expressions like “he conquered her heart”, “he fought to win her hand”; the metaphor “LOVE IS A JOURNEY”, expressed in “we have gone a long way together”, “their relationship was progressing well but now it is going nowhere”, or the metaphor “LOVE IS MAGIC”, found in phrases like “he was under her spell”, or “he was so charming that I was entranced”. Obviously, each of these metaphors reflects different views of love. Fire is pleasant as well as destructive, war entails a conflict between adversaries, journeys are lengthy processes shared with companions, while magic is supernatural and hence uncontrollable. Making use of a specific metaphor indicates how the user

feels about the term love, or what aspect of this term they wish to stress.

Jewish love magic contains two main expressions of the conceptual metaphor “LOVE IS FIRE”: firstly, the heart burning metaphors that were described above, and secondly, candle-light metaphors, such as in the following amulet, dated to the eleventh century:

May you light the face of Bagida daughter of Haiza

in front of Mufaddal son of Iraq as a candle that is lighting

in the house<sup>12</sup>

Each of these metaphors stresses a different aspect of love: a physical/sexual intensity in the heart burning case, as opposed to a milder, non-consuming warmth and affection in the case of the candle light. The latter metaphor can also be found in spells for obtaining favor and grace, where one man wishes to win the sympathy of another man.

Interestingly, different cultural traditions employ different metaphors to describe love. For instance, Greek and Roman love magic often refers to melting in a fire: “as this wax melts, so shall melt the heart of N son/daughter of N with love”. Here, too, the conceptual metaphor remains “LOVE IS FIRE”, but the stress is different. Such melting metaphors are absent from Jewish spells for love, perhaps because in Hebrew the melting of one’s heart denotes fear, not love. Conversely, Arabic love spells from the Middle Ages prefer to employ the term “to storm” a person, not fire-related terms. The conceptual metaphor, thus, is “LOVE IS A FORCE OF NATURE”, with the stress being on the turmoil and lack of control experienced by a person in love. Similarly, an interesting study comparing love metaphors in the Turkish language with those found in English concluded that Turkish stresses the elements of suffering in love, as well as introvert and solitary reflection, whereas English focuses on the cooperation elements between the partners, meaning that the metaphors are “LOVE IS AN INNER JOURNEY vs. A JOINT JOURNEY”.<sup>13</sup> The variance was explained through the influence of medieval Sufi traditions on present-day Turkish culture.

It may be concluded that, while love is a universal phenomenon, with similar physical and emotional manifestations, the elements reflected in love metaphors denote different cultural foci. It seems that in Jewish love magic in the late-antique and medieval periods the focus was on the physical passion, which may be both warming and consuming, just like a fire.

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### From love to hate: fire metaphors in aggressive magic

In addition to the numerous spells and practices of love magic that include fire metaphors, these also appear in spells for harming an adversary. For instance, the Cairo Genizah preserves several spells titled “Sending a fire”, which – similarly to the love spells– aim to inflame a person, however not with passion, but in order to destroy them:

Sending a fire.

Write with the blood of a fowl (...)

Send sparks from your spark and fire from your fire, as it is written

in the Torah, ‘The Lord will strike you with wasting disease, with fever and inflammation, with scorching heat’ etc., so shall he strike N son of N. (...)

And bury it (the text)

in a grave or in front of your foe’s house gate.<sup>14</sup>

At times, aggressive spells of this kind are combined with spells for separation, whose aim is to sow hate between two lovers. Thus, we can find in the Cairo Genizah spells with elements pertaining to fire and burning, titled “To kill and to send a fire, and also for hate and to separate”, the latter categories being part of love magic.

Interestingly, in most cases the magical practice does not involve burning the text, as in the case of love magic, but burying it in the ground or tossing it into a well or some other water source. The reasons for this may relate to the different spell aims: aggressive magic might have required a negative activating ground, such as that provided by a cemetery or a water source, the latter viewed as related to the forces of the Underworld. Another difference between the two types of spells regards the body parts that had to be affected by the fire. While love magic required burning the heart and sometimes kidneys of the spell target, aggressive magic usually requires burning his/her entire body.

How may we interpret the use of an identical motif, fire, in magical practices designed for such different aims? One way would be to look at the physical manifestations of love and hate. In both cases, the person experiencing these emotions often feels an increased heartbeat and a rise



in body heat. It may well be that these were the feelings that the magical practitioners transferred, willingly or inadvertently, to the targets of their spells.

### Fiery feelings?

Fire is a key symbol in Jewish love magic, manifested in both practical and metaphorical ways. Such key symbols may be useful for understanding the cultural characteristics of a given society or tradition, since, as we have seen above, different cultures employ different symbolism and metaphors to describe the same feelings. The conceptual metaphor “LOVE IS FIRE” is primarily related to aspects of sexual and physical passion. However, a broad survey of Jewish love magic indicates that these elements are rarely mentioned explicitly. On the contrary, these magical texts display a modest style, almost entirely lacking sexual terminology (as opposed to, for instance, Graeco-Roman love magic). Thus, I suggest that the frequent use of fire symbolism in practices and metaphors of Jewish love magic was meant as a euphemistic resort. Through this symbolism the practitioners and users could express their fiery feelings. This is not to say those people felt only physical attraction and no “romantic” affection (to use an anachronistic term); they obviously did both. However, it seems that in addition to the request to “light the face of Bagida daughter of Haiza in front of Mufaddal son of Iraq” so that he feels “love and affection and mercy” towards her, the text also concealed another significant layer, which was expressed in the demand to “burn Mufaddal’s heart after her”.

Love magic of all periods and locations makes use of metaphors, either explicitly spoken (“May her heart burn as this shard burns”) or merely implied in the magical actions (burning a potshard). These metaphors, however, have been showed to vary according to the cultural setting in which they occur. Two contemporaneous and geographically adjacent cultures, such as Judaism and Islam in medieval Egypt, could employ different metaphors when composing love spells, the former focusing on LOVE IS FIRE and the latter on LOVE IS A FORCE OF NATURE. Jewish love magic in Late Antiquity and the medieval period exhibits a clear preference for metaphors related to fire, with the focus lying on burning the heart and kidneys of the person whose love is sought. Additionally, the fire motif appears in other instances of Jewish love magic, such as the names of the supernatural entities invoked in the spells. These features are, in part, culturally specific. They

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differ from those found in the love magic of other cultural traditions, such as the Graeco-Roman one, where the fire symbolism is used in different ways, mainly melting and fever. Thus, the key symbol of fire illuminates aspects of the Jewish cultural tradition in these periods, brightly reflected in the practice of magic.

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## Notes

1. This article is partially based on Ortal-Paz Saar, "May His Heart Burn after Her: The Motif of Fire in Love Spells from the Cairo Genizah," (in Hebrew) *Pe'amim* 133-134 (2013): 209–239. For a broad overview of the topic, see Ortal-Paz Saar, *Jewish Love Magic: From Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2017).
2. For a popular introduction to the Cairo Genizah and its history, see Mark S. Glickman, *Sacred Treasure - The Cairo Genizah: The Amazing Discoveries of Forgotten Jewish History in an Egyptian Synagogue Attic* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2011).
3. Sherry B. Ortner, "On Key Symbols," *American Anthropologist* 75 (1973): 1338–1346.
4. Ortner, "On Key Symbols", 1339.
5. Medieval Genizah manuscript T-S K 1.73, published in Joseph Naveh and Shaul Shaked, *Amulets and Magic Bowls: Aramaic Incantations of Late Antiquity, 3rd ed.* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1998), Geniza 6.
6. "It should be written on an unbaked potsherd and thrown into the fire".
7. *Sefer ha-Razim*, Second Firmament, lines 31–36. See Bill Rebigier and Peter Schäfer, *Sefer ha-Razim i und ii: Das Buch der Geheimnisse i und ii* (2 vols; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), §127.
8. Naveh and Shaked, *Amulets and Magic Bowls*, Amulet 10. On this magical product, see also Gideon Bohak, *Ancient Jewish Magic: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 156–158; Saar, *Jewish Love Magic*, 118–120.
9. Medieval Italian manuscript JTSL 8114, fol. 92 (93)b:16–19, published in Saar, *Jewish Love Magic*, 106.
10. Medieval Genizah manuscript Mosseri V.227, fol. 1a, b (Cambridge University Library).
11. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 2nd ed. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003). See also Zoltán Kövecses, *The Language of Love: The Semantics of Passion in Conversational English* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1988).
12. Medieval Genizah manuscript Or. 1080.15.81, published in Peter Schäfer and Shaul Shaked (eds.), *Magische Texte aus der Kairoer Geniza* (vol. 1; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1994), 160–170.
13. Yeşim Aksan and Dilek Kantar, "No Wellness Feels Better than This Sickness: Love Metaphors from a Cross-Cultural Perspective," *Metaphor and Symbol* 23 (2008): 262–291.

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14. Medieval Genizah manuscript T-S K 1.91 + K 1.117, published by Joseph Naveh and Shaul Shaked, *Magic Spells and Formulae: Aramaic Incantations of Late Antiquity* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1993), Geniza 16.