



# Societas Magica Newsletter

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## Israel's Name at the Site of the Circumcision: Eros and Magic in the *Shiur Qomah*

Marla Segol  
University at Buffalo

The *Shiur Qomah* infamously describes in detail the names and the measurements of the divine body, in a manner shocking to many people today. It provides the length of each limb, its name, and in key places, the material of which it is made. It was most likely written between the fifth and seventh centuries, and it now exists in many different versions, each consisting of a multigeneric collection of hymns and narratives. Most versions contain eighteen chapters of praise, some describing divine characteristics, others providing the measurements of the gigantic divine body part by part. The most important of these are the *Sefer HaQomah*, *Merkavah Rabba*, and the *Sefer Raziel* versions, the first two of which stand independently, while the third is part of a late antique grimoire of that name.<sup>1</sup>

Because the *Shiur Qomah* asserts divine corporeality, differing from later versions of monotheism, the text is still seriously neglected – particularly those very material and embodied aspects I am about to discuss here.<sup>2</sup> Martin Cohen, the foremost scholar on the subject, argues that the text is a work of both liturgy and theurgy, comprising a celestial prayer service, set in the *merkavah* realm of the divine chariot. Cohen shows quite clearly the effective function of the text, which promises

... a shining face, a handsome body, the fear of others, a good reputation, peaceful dreams, a good memory for Torah, prosperity in this world, entrée into the next, forgiveness for the sins of one's youth, freedom from evil inclinations, and safety from all sorts of demons, wild beasts, and scorpions.<sup>3</sup>

The effective function is apparent here, though it is not clear why the authors believed it to be so. Cohen also notes that the *Shiur Qomah* quotes the *Song*

## *Shiur Qomah* cont'd

*of Songs* to describe the divine body, but he does not theorize its role in the effective function of the text. Thus I will add to his argument by theorizing the effective function of the text in two ways, first, that it expresses its theurgic function by means of the conventions of amulets and magic seals to protect and transform the operator, and second, that it imagines the relation between operator and divine according to the aestheticized and sexualized relationship between lover and beloved in the *Song of Songs*, and third, that the power posited by the text is rooted in this relationship. This shows an early Jewish confluence of sexuality and magic.

The *Shiur Qomah* describes the transformative power of memorizing and reciting the dimensions of the divine body. The text contains a number of different descriptions of the divine body made of stones, gems, and metals. These are quoted from the biblical *Song of Songs*, which describes the body of a male beloved from the perspective of the desiring female lover. These descriptions provide important clues for understanding the transformative power of the work. They posit that gazing at the divine body, as the female lover does at the male beloved in the *Song of Songs*, can effect a transformation *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of the divine. Even more, while these evoke the *Song of Songs*, they also reference amulet-making traditions in which the inscription of names on jewels, stones, and metals activates power, both protective and transformative. Thus God's jeweled parts, represented as amulets, facilitate an intimate, sexualized human divine relationship that transforms the

viewer in the image of the divine.

The jeweled divine body appears mainly in the narrative sections of the text, containing long lists of divine body parts and their names, constructed of stones, jewels and metals. These generally fit into three categories: First, there are parts of the body inscribed with names as though made of stone and constructed like an amulet. These materials are sometimes inscribed with divine names and sometimes with the name of Israel. Second, there is one instance in which the divine body wears an amulet. And third, some descriptions consist of images taken from the *Song of Songs*, as the whole divine body is made of tarshish,<sup>4</sup> probably blue beryl, with its individual parts made of the same materials listed in description of the male lover of *Song of Songs* 5. In all of these cases, the text is clear about the transformative and apotropaic powers attributed to them.

To keep things simple I am going to focus mostly on two versions of the text, the *Sefer HaQomah*, and the *Sefer Raziel*. Cohen views the *Sefer HaQomah* as the Ur-text, and *Sefer Raziel* as closely related to it.<sup>5</sup> The *Sefer Raziel* version occurs in the context of larger work of the same name. In analyzing the *Sefer HaQomah*, I'll examine sections C, D, F, and Jx, supplemented with additions from the *Sefer Raziel* version. As a group, the descriptions of the divine body are assigned apotropaic, salvific, and transformative power. Their powers are detailed in the *Sefer HaQomah's* Section C:

...all who know this secret are certain [to acquire] the world to come. The Holy

One, blessed be He, will save him from every evil thing, and from all kinds of sorcery and from the evil eye and from the evil inclination and from evil thoughts and from all kinds of destroyers, and from all kinds of damagers, and from poverty and from evil plans.<sup>6</sup>

This parallels the text typically appearing on Hebrew protective amulets, which Trachtenberg describes as follows:

They generally contain:  
1. the names of God and of angels; 2. the Biblical expressions or phrases, descriptive of God's attributes, or bespeaking His protection and healing power, such as "yhvh Zebaot is His name," "who rests upon the Cherubs," etc; 3. the meticulousness with which the various functions

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## ***Shiur Qomah cont'd***

of the amulet are detailed; 4. the name of the person the amulet is meant to serve, and his mother's name.<sup>7</sup>

All but the patron's name is present in the *Sefer HaQomah*. This section immediately precedes an itemized description of the divine body, which pays greater attention to divine names and their functions. These are, therefore, two parts of an amulet.<sup>8</sup>

Naomi Janowitz writes that in the *Shiur Qomah*, the names of the limbs embody the performative force of each part of the deity. God is conceived of as a collection of powerful forces, each force being captured in the name of a limb and performed when its name is spoken. Sexual desire is part of that performance. This is clear as the text focuses on divine radiance and desirability.<sup>9</sup> These parts draw heavily upon the *Song of Songs* in which the lover's jeweled body is made of entirely of *tarshish*, a luminous blue stone. Section D describes it as follows: *Merkavah Rabbah*

His body is like *Tarshish*. His splendor is luminous and awesome within the darkness; cloud and fog surround him and all the princes of the presence swoon, overcome by the power of His loveliness and beauty, like water poured out from a pitcher.<sup>10</sup>

In this account and in its parallels in other versions, the divine body, made of *tarshish*, is itself set like a jewel in a cosmos of cloud and fog. The effect of "His splendor" is immediate - the angels lose their volition and they swoon from desire.

Thus God's *tarshish* body is like that of the male beloved in the Song of Songs, also made of that gem, and desirability is essential to it.

Section D also includes long accounts of divine body parts and their names. The most important of these- heart, forehead, and penis- have writing on them. The first two, like amulets, have divine names written on them. SQ D says "And on his Heart are written [cotvim] seventy names)."<sup>11</sup> And on his forehead are written [cotvim] seventy letters.<sup>12</sup> These refer to the seventy divine names and to the seventy-letter divine name. In this way, God's body itself becomes an amulet, as this is one of the primary means of constructing them. The grammar is also very interesting here, giving some indication of human activity in this process.<sup>13</sup> In this way, the heart and the forehead resemble amulets, effective names carved in them.

Section F sheds some light on the meaning of this carving, showing important connections between the making of amulets and the depiction of God's jeweled body. It uses intact sections of the *Song of Songs*, mostly from chapter 5, but also from chapter 2. It is here we find the inscribed penis alluded to above. The description of the penis occurs in F, which first asserts the proportionality of the divine to human forms, claiming (as was thought of the human form) that the width of the forehead, the width of the neck, the pinkie-span, and the length of the penis were all equivalent, both in human and divine bodies.<sup>14</sup> The reference to the inscribed penis arises through a parallel to the *Song of Songs* 5:11-14. The *Song* reads:

My beloved is shining and ruddy, pre-eminent among the ten thousand

His head is finest gold, the mane of his hair is black as a raven

His eyes are like doves by the watercourses

His cheeks are a bed of spices, a treasure of precious scents, his lips red lilies wet with myrrh

His arm a golden scepter of tarshish (shiny blue gemstone, beryl)

His loins (eshet) the ivory of thrones inlaid with sapphire, his thighs like marble pillars on pedestals of gold.<sup>15</sup>

Most of this SQ passage cites the *Song of Songs* directly, but out of order; the part that varies is the one that describes the "loins" of the lover in the *Song*. The translator, Cohen, points out that *even*, or stone (quoted below) may be a euphemism, and I think my evidence shows he's right. Our *Shiur Qomah* text reads as follows:

And the stone (*even*) between his horns has "Israel, my people is mine" engraved on it. My beloved is shining and ruddy, pre-eminent among the ten thousand. His head is finest gold. His eyes are like doves by the watercourses...<sup>16</sup>

*Song of Songs* describes the anatomy of the lover, head to loins. The SQ reverses the order, and swaps out the penis (*eshet*) with a rock between two rays or horns. The concern with the penis, evidenced throughout this section, supports **cont'd on page 5**

# Societas Magica Activities at the 51<sup>st</sup> International Congress on Medieval Studies – Western Michigan University, May 12-15, 2016

**Session 119, Thursday, 3:30 PM, Schneider 1120**

## **PICTURING A MAGICAL COSMOS**

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*Lettrist Cosmologies in Fifteenth-Century Iran: Ibn Turka's Tahawī Circle*

Matthew Melvin-Koushki, Univ. of South Carolina–Columbia

*Alphabetic Diagrams of the Sefirot: The Letter, the Body, and the God*

Marla Segol

*Cosmography as a Talismanic and Theurgic Tool in Medieval Islamic Occultism*

Liana Saif, St. Cross College, Univ. of Oxford

*Arbitrary Order and the Puzzles of the Otherworld in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

Arielle C. McKee, Purdue Univ.

**Session 245, Friday, 1:30 PM, Schneider 1140**

## **THE MAGICIAN'S PATRONS AND CLIENTS**

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*Democratizing Divinity: The "Mithras Liturgy" and the Ancient Egyptian ph-ntr Oracle in Late Antique Greco-Roman Egypt*

Mark Roblee, Univ. of Massachusetts–Amherst

*A Diverse but Familiar Clientele: Magicians and their Clients in Late Medieval Paris*

Brian Forman, Northwestern Univ.

*"Of Counsel to Get It": Nine Men and the Mixindale Treasure*

Frank Klaassen and Sharon Wright, St. Thomas More College

**Session 304, Friday 3:30 PM, Schneider 1235**

## **MAGIC ON THE PAGE: TRANSMISSION AND REPRESENTATION OF MAGIC**

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Organizer: László Sándor Chardonens, Radboud Univ.

Nijmegen

President: Mildred Budny, Research Group on Manuscript Evidence

*Stars in the Hand: The Infusion of Astrology in Chiromancy*

Samuel Gillis Hogan, Univ. of Saskatchewan

*Magical Reconfigurations in Ganell's Summa in the Kassel Manuscript*

Jan R. Veenstra, Independent Scholar --> CANCELLED

*Retrofitting Early Modern Magical Manuscripts*

László Sándor Chardonens

**Saturday, 11:45 AM, Fetzer 1055**

Societas Magica Business Meeting

**Session 408, Saturday 1:30 PM, Schneider 1145**

## **PROS(E) AND CONS: ANTI-MAGIC POLEMIC I**

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*"Wie etlich ding natürlich sind und etlich von dem tiüffel sind": Johannes Hartlieb and the Demon Compulsion of the Saints*

Collin Brown, Univ. of Texas–Austin

*The Evolution of the "Witches' Ointment" in Alonso Tostado's Commentaries on Genesis and Matthew*

Thomas Hatsis, Independent Scholar

*Miracle or Magic? The Virgin's Interventions in Two Magically Inclined Cantigas*

Veronica Menaldi, Univ. of Minnesota–Twin Cities

**Session 463, Saturday 3:30 PM, Schneider 1160**

## **PROS(E) AND CONS: ANTI-MAGIC POLEMIC II**

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*Lived Magic and the Uses of Anti-Magical Rhetoric: John of Morigny and Milarepa*

Claire Fanger, Rice Univ.

*Portrayal of the Magician in the Polemics of Emperor Zār'a Ya 'aqob of Ethiopia*

Augustine Dickinson, Univ. of Waterloo

*Sed Contra: Arguments in Favor of Magic in the Picatrix*

David Porreca

## Shiur Qomah cont'd

this reading. For example, many of the anatomical catalogues appearing in this work begin and end with the loins- they move from feet to loins, and loins to head. In all accounts this is the center of the description of the divine body. And this brings us to our main point: like the heart and the forehead, it has letters engraved on it. Here it restates the covenant between God and Israel in a syntax also borrowed from the *Song of Songs*, but this time from 2:16.<sup>17</sup> The writer swaps *dodi li v'ani lo* (My beloved is mine and I am his)<sup>18</sup> for the same sort of parallelism in this: *Yisrael ami Li Yisrael*. (Israel is my nation and I am Israel's nation.)<sup>19</sup> Parallelism, either palindromes or reversing phrases like the ones we see here, are also quite common in the construction of amulets, as this augments their incantatory function. Thus the covenant is engraved in the divine penis like an amulet. This then is the third of the inscribed divine body parts, two of which have divine names written on them and the third of which is inscribed with Israel's name at the site of circumcision.

Both human and divine bodies are sexualized- here, the female Israel is actually inscribed on a stone which is a euphemism for the divine penis. Thus human bodies appear primordially in sexual relation to the divine, expressed in the form of the covenant, here a part of the divine body. This relation powers the amulet that connects them.

Other versions of the text (including *Sefer Raziel*, but not *Sefer HaQomah*) depict God wearing the world as an amulet: "The right arm is 150,000,000 parasangs. And the entire world hangs from it, as an amulet hangs from the arm of a hero."<sup>20</sup> The inscription of names and phrases is a key component of the stone amulets common in late antiquity, and this gains significance as God is himself depicted wearing an amulet. Moreover, since amulets so often feature the inscription of divine names placed on the human body, it is interesting that God wears the world on his body, with the name of Israel inscribed there as well. That these inscriptions consist of palindromes and reversible phrases, points to a sort of reciprocity in which human and divine inscribe

their names on each other.

Returning to Janowitz's idea that the recitation of the names of the divine body is a series of transformational moments, it becomes clear that stones, gems and metals are key to this process. They appear first, as amulets either inscribed on or appended to the divine body, and second they appear as the constituent materials of divine body parts, the descriptions of which are directly cited from the *Song of Songs*, a biblical love poem that is often interpreted to describe the love relationship between human and divine. When the writer states that parts of God's body are made of stone, they are likened to that of the male beloved in the *Song of Songs*. And in so doing, he is placing it in an eroticized relationship to the human being, as he gazes longingly on it from the position of the female beloved in the form of the people Israel. The inscription on the stones names the parties to the relationship, much as amulets do. When key body parts are described as amulets either potentially made by human

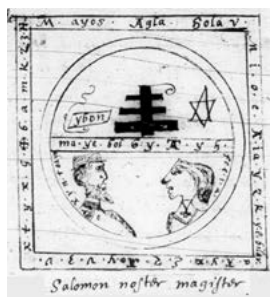
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## The Societas Magica invites proposals for essays to run in future issues of the newsletter.

We are looking for short essays (1500-2500 words) announcing new developments deriving from research in the study and teaching of magic and its related topics. We would be especially interested to see lead articles on modern magic, or periods other than medieval. We are also looking for smaller pieces for our notes and queries column. News about dissertations in progress or completed, manuscript discoveries, or other such items are all welcomed.

Please contact David Porreca: [dporreca@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:dporreca@uwaterloo.ca)

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## Shiur Qomah cont'd

beings or as inscribing human community onto God's sexual parts, the intimate relationship between human and divine is represented, materialized, and perpetuated. Thus the transformation enacted in reciting the jeweled divine body is the activation of that relationship, and apotropaic, transformational, and relational power. This, in turn, is composed for the purposes of memorization, recitation as liturgy, and for a theurgy activated in the context of a sexualized relationship.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Martin Samuel Cohen, *The Shi'ur Qomah: Texts and Recensions* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1985), 6.

<sup>2</sup> Alexander Altman has called the SQ "the most obnoxious document of Jewish mysticism." Alexander Altmann, "Moses Narboni's Epistle on Shiur Qoma" in *Studies in Religion, Philosophy, and Mysticism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969), 195. Joseph Dan has interpreted the intensive descriptions of divine limbs as *reductio ad absurdum*; because the divine body is so enormous and so dazzling, the descriptions must simply show that it is unimaginable. Joseph Dan, "Shi'ur Komah," in *The Ancient Jewish Mysticism* (Tel-Aviv: MOD Books, 1993) 74f.; idem, "The Concept of Knowledge in the Shi'ur Qomah," in *Studies in Jewish Religious and Intellectual History, presented to Alexander Altmann*, ed. Siegfried Stein and Raphael Loewe (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1979), 67-73.

<sup>3</sup> Cohen, *Texts and Recensions*, 20. This formula also occurs in *Merkavah Rabba* 140-1, *Merkavah Rabba* 176-8, *Merkavah Rabba* line 186: Cohen, *Texts and Recensions*, 53; 73; 74. This part of the text, describing the rewards for reciting it, is common to most versions, and it is an important part of the way the text theorizes its own power.

<sup>4</sup> Wesley Muhammad summarizes the history of the translation of tarshish as follows: The difficulty lies in the Hebrew term itself. *Taršīš* is used in the Bible to designate a geographical location (Jer. 10:9; Ezek. 27:12; 38:13), a precious stone (Exod. 28:20; 39:13; Ezek. 28:13; Cant. 5:14), and a proper name (Gen. 10:4; I Chr. 1:7).<sup>71</sup>... As a stone, the term is usually translated either as the sea-blue beryl (Targum Onqelos ad Exod. 28:20; 39:13, AV, RV, JB) or chrysolite (LXX, Quinta and Sexta, Aquila, Vulgate, RIV)... Cyrus Gordon notes that, when designating the jewel, it signifies the color of the sea in particular, as already perceived by *Tg. Ong.* (Exod. 28:20; 39:13). "Sapphiric God: Esoteric Speculation on the Divine Body in Post-Biblical Jewish Tradition." Wesley Muhammad, PhD, forthcoming in *The Harvard Theological Review*.

<sup>5</sup> He writes that "there can be no question that we are dealing with parallel recensions of a single original text." Cohen, *Texts and Recensions*, 23.

<sup>6</sup> *Sefer HaQomah* 24, Cohen, *Texts and Recensions*, 133.

<sup>7</sup> Joshua Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition: A study in folk religion* (New York: Berhman's Jewish Book House, 1939), 139-40.

<sup>8</sup> Naomi Janowitz, "God's Body," in Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, ed. *People of the body: Jews and Judaism from an embodied perspective* (Binghamton: SUNY Press, 2012), 189-90.

<sup>9</sup> For example, line eighty reads: "His Splendor is luminous," while in later portions the angels swoon from desire. The word "beauty" is used three times, and the divine countenance is described as "shining" used three times. In the Raziel version, God is described as "beautiful" four times, while the word "beauty" appears eight times in that version.

<sup>10</sup> Martin Samuel Cohen, *The Shi'ur Qomah: Liturgy and Theurgy in pre-Kabbalistic Jewish Mysticism* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1983), 67.

<sup>11</sup> *Raziel* 117, *Sefer Haqomah* 85-87: Cohen, *Texts and Recensions*, 143.

<sup>12</sup> *Sefer HaQomah* 87-8: Cohen, *Texts and Recensions*, 143.

<sup>13</sup> Compare this to Section Jx's description of the cosmos, which is created and then completed as it is "engraved (*nhkk*) on 12 stones and written (*nctv*) in seven voices" (9) Jx uses the passive form. Section D, examined here, uses *cotvim*, which is the present form, but it can also describe a convention, sometimes used as a form of command in Hebrew. It is possible that with the use of *cotvim* instead of *nctav*, the reader is being asked to participate in the continuous writing of the names, or that the writer is describing a convention, something that is usually done.

<sup>14</sup> *Sefer Raziel* 181: Cohen, *Texts and Recensions*, 96. For Talmudic sources see Salmon b. Yeruhim, ed. Davidson, 123, lines 57-59, which read, "They wrote the calculation of its width was the height from the shoulders to the neck. Calculating by [means of] the length of the nose, which equals the length of the pinky-finger." This reflects a clearer text than the one before us, and is similar to several manuscripts. The text of Salmon's and of those manuscripts that are similar to his is supported by the striking fact that the only fragment of the *Shi'ur Qomah* that is parallel to a section of the Talmud is precisely this one, relating the appropriate proportion of nose to pinky-finger, and indicating thereby the point at which nose-length may be considered a defect of sufficient gravity to invalidate a priest's right to serve in the Temple. Cohen, *Liturgy and Theurgy*, 218, note 8.

<sup>15</sup> Bloch, Ariel, and Bloch, Chana, *The Song of Songs: A New Translation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 5:11-13, pp. 87-9.

<sup>16</sup> *Sefer Raziel* 185, *Sefer HaQomah* 116; Cohen, *Texts and Recensions*, 97; 151.

<sup>17</sup> It may even refer to a stele, and upright stone inscribed to commemorate an historical event or to articulate a political relationship.

<sup>18</sup> Bloch, *Song of Songs*, 2:16, p. 65.

<sup>19</sup> *Raziel* 121: Cohen, *Texts and Recensions*, 151.

<sup>20</sup> *Siddur Rabbah* line 90, and *Merkavah Rabba* line 143. *Sefer Raziel* 367 states that "He hangs meonah' on his arm," which refers to a celestial domain. Cohen, *Texts and Recensions*, 48; 69; 114.

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