



The Encyclopedia of Jewish Myth, Magic and Mysticism

By Geoffrey W. Dennis

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"This is a book of husks and sparks, of things lost and then recovered..." So begins Rabbi Geoffrey Dennis in his introduction to this one-of-a-kind encyclopedia devoted to the esoteric in Judaism—the fabulous, the miraculous, and the mysterious. *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Myth, Magic, and Mysticism* presents "lore that can spiritually enrich the life of anyone, Jewish or not, who wishes to understand the mysteries that underlie our universe."

Jewish esotericism is the oldest and most influential continuous occult tradition in the West. This comprehensive treasury of Jewish teachings and lore drawn from sources spanning Jewish scripture, Talmud, the Midrash, the Kabbalah, and other esoteric branches of Judaism, is exhaustively researched yet easy to use. It includes over one thousand alphabetical entries, from Aaron to Zohar Chadesh, with extensive cross-references to related topics.

The Encyclopedia of Jewish Myth, Magic, and Mysticism includes a complete bibliography and helpful sections such as a quick reference glossary of frequently used terms, notes on Hebrew usage and transliteration, an appendix of illustrations, and a list of abbreviations of traditional sources. For the first time ever, thirty-five hundred years of accumulated secret wisdom, drawn from the wells of a great spiritual tradition, is at your fingertips.

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Editorial Review

From the Publisher

"An erudite and lively compendium of Jewish magical beliefs, practices, texts, and individuals. Geoffrey Dennis serves up a delicious schmorgesbord of the irrational, demonstrating that Judaism has been and is not only a rational and legalistic monotheism, but also a rich storehouse of magical traditions that Jews often fail to recognize. This superb comprehensive encyclopedia belongs in every serious library." --Richard M. Golden, Professor of History and Director of the Jewish Studies Program, University of North Texas, and editor of the Encyclopedia of Witchcraft: The Western Tradition

About the Author

Geoffrey Dennis is rabbi of Congregation Kol Ami in Flower Mound, TX. He is also Lecturer in Kabbalah and rabbinic literature at the University of North Texas. He received his M.HL and was ordained at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. He also has degrees in Education and Nursing.

His articles have appeared in *Sh'ma*, *Parabola*, *Healing Ministries*, *The Journal of the Central Conference of American Rabbis*, and *The American Journal of Hospice and Palliative Care*. He has two recent articles, "The Bride of God: Jewish Erotic Theology" appears in *Jews and Sex*, published in Feb. 2008, "Water as a Medium of Altered States of Consciousness in Early Jewish Mysticism," slated to appear in the spring issue of *Anthropology of Consciousness*.

His book with Llewellyn, *The Encyclopedia of Myth, Magic, and Mysticism*, has been selected as a runner up in the 2007 National Jewish Book Award, and received Honorable Mention in the Jewish Library Association 2007 Book Awards.

He is married and has two sons.

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A

Aaron: The brother of **moses** and **miriam**, Aaron was both a prophet and the first High Priest. In Jewish tradition, he exemplifies the virtues of duty and peacemaking. Alongside Moses, he performed various miraculous deeds and signs before Pharaoh and his court. Aaron transformed his **rod** into a **serpent**, which consumed the serpents created by Egyptian magicians (Ex. 7). The first three of the ten **plagues** (**blood**, **frogs**, and lice) were initiated by Aaron at God's command (Ex. 7-8).

In his role as High **Priest** of the new sacrificial cult of God, Aaron enjoyed supernatural protection. He survived a trial by ordeal when his authority was challenged by **korach** and his kinsmen. His status as High Priest evidently immunized him from divine punishment (Ex. 34; Num. 8) and he was instrumental in checking a plague

sent by God among the Israelites by performing a rite with **incense** from the **altar** (Num. 17:1-15). According to the **Bible**, Aaron died by the will of God before entering the Land of Israel.

Rabbinic literature describes miraculous events surrounding the death of Aaron. God placed one mountain on top of another to mark where Aaron would be buried, which is why the Bible calls his burial place *Hor ha-Har* (“Mount Mountain”). Aaron was laid to rest on a couch in a luminous **cave** on Mount Hor by **angels**. He was then enveloped by a **Cloud of glory** and he died by the **kiss** of God (Yalkut, Chukkat 764; Lev. R. 10; Mid. Teh. 83.1). In the mystical theosophy of the **sefirot**, Aaron symbolizes the emanation of **Hod**, divine glory. He is also one of the **ushpizin**, the spiritual ancestors invited to sit in the sukkah with the living during the holiday of **sukkot**.

It is interesting to note that despite the many theurgicreligious elements in the biblical accounts of him and the magical attributes of his rod, unlike Moses, Aaron is not widely portrayed as a magician in non-Jewish circles.

Aaron of Baghdad: A mysterious, possibly mythical figure, whom early medieval mystics in Western Europe credited with bringing Jewish esoteric traditions to them from the **east**.¹ A number of miraculous tales about him have been preserved in books such as **sefer Yuhasin**.

1. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 41, 84.

Abaddon: “Destruction.” One of the compartments of **gehenna** (Masekhet Gehinnom). In the book of Job, it is **Death** personified. The New Testament identifies Abaddon as the “Angel of the Abyss” (Rev. 9:11).

Abba: “Father.” A Talmudic holy man who, although not an ordained **rabbi**, has shown spiritual or healing powers. The word is also applied in various ways to the mystical Godhead. *see* partzufim; sefirot.

Abbahu, Rabbi: Talmudic Sage (ca. 3rd-4th century). He experienced clairvoyant dreams. An avid collector of lore, both legal and legendary, he preserved a number of stories of how angels intervened in the life of biblical figures (PdRE 16, 43).

Abbaye: A Talmudic Sage and folk healer. Abbaye once tricked Rabbi **Acha** into exorcizing a **demon** from his house of study (Shab. 66b).

Abbreviations: The use of abbreviations appears in Hebrew writings as early as the 2nd century BCE. Variously called **notarikon**, *siman*, or *rosh tevot*, abbreviations have been widely used for the functional purpose of saving space at a time when writing materials were costly and scarce. But even though the origins of the practice are obviously utilitarian, this method of writing is, in fact, a kind

of **encryption**. As such, abbreviations can also be a form of esoteric communication. Over time, certain kinds of abbreviations, such as acronyms (words formed from the first letter or syllable of other words) and **acrostics** (verses arranged so that a particular letter from each line, taken in order, spells out a word or phrase), came to be regarded as dynamic sources of secret knowledge and power to Jewish mystics and to magical practitioners of all persuasions.¹

Thus the name for the month preceding the High Holy Days, *Elul*, is seen as an acronym for **Ani L'dodi V'dodi Li** (I am my beloved's and He is mine). In another example, **BeresHIt** (Gen. 1:1, “In the beginning”) is understood to be an acronym for **Bara Rakia, Eretz, Shamayim, Yam Tahom**, “He created the firmament, land, heaven, sea, and abyss.”

In Kabbalah, abbreviations are sometimes called *tzeruf otiyot*, or letter combinations. Perhaps the most famous of these is related to the Talmudic story (Ber. 55a) of the **four sages** who entered **Pardes** (Paradise). Tradition teaches that *pardes* (“orchard”) is an acronym for the four methods of **torah** interpretation: **Pashat, Remez, D'rash, and Sod** (plain meaning, allegoric, homiletic, and esoteric). In other words, the living may find entry to Paradise by penetrating into the mysteries concealed within the Torah text.

Abbreviations are also an almost universal feature on **amulets**. One talismanic acronym is the word **shaddai** (shin-dalet-yud) that appears on a **mezuzah**. The word itself is a biblical **name of god**, but also stands for **Shomer Delatot Yisrael** (Guardian of the doorways of Israel). The presence of this acronym-incantation helps give the mezuzah its protective power. **magic squares** and diagrams constructed from different kinds of abbreviations dot medieval Jewish books on mystical knowledge, **magic**, and **alchemy**.

Names of worthy figures are sometimes held to be abbreviations of esoteric teachings. Thus the name **Jacob, YAaKoV**, is actually made up of four titles of God, **Yotzrecha, Osecha, Konecha, and Borecha** (your Former, your Maker, your Owner, your Creator), revealing God's special relationship with Jacob, and through him, his descendants. The most notable and widespread name abbreviation custom to this day is the various methods adopted for writing an abbreviation for the **tetragrammaton** so that it may not be pronounced and to thereby prevent the erasure or destruction of God's written name. *also see* anagram; hafuch; israel; temurah; tzeruf.

1. Singer, *Jewish Encyclopedia*, vol. 1, 39-43.

Abdiel: An angel mentioned in **sefer raziel**.

Abihu: The brother of Nadav. *see* nadav and avihu.

ABiYAh: This word is a mystical acronym for the **four worlds of emanation: Atzilut, Beriyah, Yetzirah, and Asiyah.**

Ablution: *see* immersion; mikvah; water.

Abner: The commander of Saul's army. The Philistines were not the only ancients who employed **giants**. Abner was so enormous that while he slept, David was able to crawl beneath his crooked knees and so escape a trap Saul had set for him (Eccl. R. 9:11; Yalkut Jer. 285; AbbS). He was the son of the **woman of endor** (PdRE 33).

Abracadabra: The archetypal *voce magica*, magical word. Many claim it to be of Jewish origin reading it as a kind of fractured Aramaic, *ab'ra k'dabra*, meaning, "I will create according to the word." This is very plausible, assuming the Aramaic syntax has undergone corruption. It is also plausible that it is of non-Jewish origin. *see* hebrew alphabet; incantations; magic.

Abraham: (Hebrew: *Avraham*). The progenitor of the Jewish people, Abraham is also considered in rabbinic tradition to be a natural philosopher, mystic, and a prophet second only to Moses. He personifies loving-kindness, devotion, and faithfulness.

Abbaye

In the **Bible**, Abraham not only responds to the direct command of God to leave his homeland for Canaan, he has several encounters with **angels** (Gen. 18, 22). In the **midrash**, he is granted many miracles. To save him as an infant from the wrath of evil King **nimrod**, he is secreted away in a cave, where the angels feed and minister to him. According to the text *Ma'asei Avraham Avenu*, God later delivers him from a fiery martyrdom planned for him by Nimrod.

In several sources, he is celebrated as an astrologer (Book of Jubilees; B.B. 16b). In one Midrash, he sees his infertility is written in stars, but comes to learn that God has power over even the astral influences. This then explains God's decision to change his name from Abram to Abraham (Gen. 15), for in changing his name, God also changes his fate.

From this experience, Abraham gives up the practice of astrology (Zohar III: 216a; *Aggadat Bereshit*).

The reason God commands him to circumcise himself (Gen. 17) is that this act of self-perfection will make the spirit of prophecy more accessible to him (PdRE 29; *Tanh.*, *Lech Lecha* 20).

In the **Zohar** he is credited with the knowledge to create a **golem** (I: 79a), a knowledge alluded to in the biblical text (Gen. 12:5). This tradition springs from a single reference to him in the final chapter of **sefer Yetzirah**. Because of this same reference, some mystics also regard

Abraham to be the author of that work. Abraham also possessed a miraculous healing stone, the **tzohar**. After his death, God suspended it from the sun, enhancing the sun's healing powers (B.B. 16b).

In early Kabbalah, Abraham comes to be regarded as an archetype, a personification of sefirotic attributes. In later works this logic is reversed, with Abraham being treated as a divine attribute whose dynamic function in the world is expressed allegorically through the Abraham saga found in the Torah. He represents the sefirah of Chesed, pure love. (Pes. 118a; Gen. R. 38, 61; Seder Eliyahu Rabbah, 1:13; Zohar, Bahir). *see* patriarchs and matriarchs; righteous, the.

Abraham, Apocalypse of: A 2nd-century-CE document that contains revelations of future history and a vision of heaven, probably of Jewish origin but also now including Christian glosses. It exists today only in Slavic language translation.

Abraham Azulai: Kabbalist (Moroccan, ca. 17th-18th century). He wrote Avraham L'chesed and an influential commentary on the Zohar. One source credits him with performing wondrous deeds, but as there are at least three prominent Abrahams in the Azulai family, this cannot be verified.

Abraham ben David of Posquieres: Mystic and polemicist (Provencal, ca. 12th century). He experienced a visitation of **elijah** (Commentary on *Yad ha-Chazakah*).

Abraham ben Moses: Kabbalist (Egyptian, ca. 13th century). Rabbi Abraham, a mystic influenced by Sufism, is most notable for being the son of **maimonides**.

Abraham ben Simeon: Magician, alchemist, and world traveler (German, ca. 14th century). Abraham is the author of *Cabala Mystica*, “The Mysterious Tradition” (or alternately, *Segullat Melakhim*, or “The Book of Sacred Magic”).

Abraham not only told tales of how he enjoyed royal patronage from many European princes, he even claimed to have given two popes occult advice. Much of what we know about Abraham is in doubt--the veracity of these stories themselves, or even whether Abraham was actually a Jew or a Christian of Jewish parentage.¹

1. Patai, *The Jewish Alchemists*, 271-89.

Abraham ibn Ezra: *see* ibn Ezra, abraham.

Abraham, Testament of: The Testament is a 2nd-century-CE apocalyptic text describing Abraham's **ascent** into heaven. It appears to be a Jewish text heavily glossed by Christian copyists. It survives only in Greek.

Abraxis: An **angel** mentioned in the Gnostic tradition that appears in later Jewish **amulets** and in Medieval Jewish angelologies.

Abu Aharon: Healer and wunder-rabbi (Italian, ca. 10th century), he performed **exorcisms**, broke the spells of **witches**, and combated **zombies** (*Sefer Yuhasin*).

Abu Aharon

Abulafia, Abraham: (1240-1291?). Medieval Spanish Kabbalist, self-proclaimed prophet, and failed **messiah**. Abulafia practiced and taught a sophisticated and novel form of ecstatic (or as he called, “prophetic”) Kabbalah that, until recent times, has not received much general attention, no doubt due to his controversial personality and career. In his own lifetime, his claims and unorthodox teachings earned him condemnation from rabbinical authorities. Fortified by belief in his own messianic identity, Abulafia at one point sought an audience before Pope Nicholas III in order to convert him. Not surprisingly, he was imprisoned for spreading his “gospel.” More surprising is that he actually survived the ordeal, outliving the Pope in question. His teachings are enjoying a revival on two fronts: renewed scholarly research, and the revival of his techniques within contemporary meditative circles.¹ *see* meditation; tzerufim; visions.

1. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 120-46; Kaplan, *Meditation and Kabbalah*, 57-71. Also see Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*.

Abyss: (*Tehom*). The name for the primordial waters that preceded Creation and are now trapped below the crust of the earth (Gen. 1; Gen. R. 13:13; Ps. 104). In **temple** times, the ritual of the **water libations** was performed to draw up these tellurian waters to help to moisten and fructify the earth (Tan. 25b).

It can also refer to the realm of the dead, the place where evil spirits and wicked souls dwell. In later Jewish eschatology, it is one of the seven compartments of **gehenna** (Masekhet Gehinnom). *see* chaos; water.

Academy on High: *see* yeshiva shel malah.

Acha ben Jacob: Talmudic Sage (ca. 4th century). He was a storyteller, folk healer, and exorcist. He once defeated a **demon** in the form of a seven-headed hydra (Kid. 29b; B.B. 75b).

Acherit ha-Yamim: “The End of Days.” *see* judgment, day of; eschatology; messiah.

Acrostic: *see* abbreviations; notarikon; hafuch; temurah; tzeruf.

Adam: (*Adam Rishon*). Adam is the first human being and an archetype for all humanity. One Kabbalistic teaching reveals that the word *ADaM* is a mystical abbreviation for the essence of human nature: **Adamah** (earth), **Dibur**

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