

**Daf Ditty Yoma 77: Pulsa Dinura**



A page from Sefer ha-Razim,

כלפי מטה אמר לו הקב"ה למיכאל מיכאל  
 סרחה אומתך אמר לפניו רבונו של עולם דיו  
 לטובים שכדם אמר לו אני שורף אוחם  
 ולטובים שכדם מיד ויאמר (\*לאיש) לבוש  
 הבדים ויאמר בוא אל בינות לגלגל אל תחת  
 לכרוב ומלא הפניך גהלי אש מכינות  
 לכרובים וורוק על העיר ויבא לעיני מיד  
 וישלח הכרוב את ידו מבינות לכרובים אל  
 האש אשר אשר בינות הכרובים וישא ויתן אל  
 הפני לבוש הבדים ויקח ויצא אמר רב תנא  
 בר בונא אמר ר' שמעון הסודא אילמלא  
 לא נצטננו גהלים מידו של \*כרוב לידו של  
 גבריאל לא נשתיירו משנאיהן של ישראל  
 שיריד ופליט וכתיב ודהנה האיש לבוש הבדים  
 אשר הקסת במתניו משיב דבר לאמר עשיתי  
 כאשר צויתני (\*[א"ר יורגן באותה שעה  
 הוציאו לגבריאל מאחורי הפרגוד ומדוהו  
 שיתין פילטי דנורא אמרו ליה אי לא עברת  
 לא עברת אי עברת אמאי לא עברת כדפקדוך

והא תנא איפכא קא נסיב לה, דתנן: מנין לסיכה שהיא כשתייה  
 ביום הכפורים? אף על פי שאין ראיה לדבר, זכר לדבר, שנאמר:  
 "ותבא כמים בקרבו וכשמן בעצמותיו!" אלא אמר רב אשי: רחיצה  
 מגופיה דקרא שמיע ליה, דכתיב: "וסוד לא סכתי".

The Gemara asks: **But the *tanna* took the opposite meaning, as we learned in a mishna: From where do we derive that smearing oil is like drinking on Yom Kippur? Although there is no explicit proof of the matter from the Bible, there is an allusion to the matter from the verse, as it is stated:**

יה וילבש קללה, כמדו: ותבא כמים בקרבו; וכשמן, בעצמותיו. 18 He clothed himself also with cursing as with his raiment, and it is come into his inward parts like water, and like oil into his bones.

Ps 109:18

“*And it came into his innards like water, and like oil into his bones*” meaning that oil on the body is like water within it. Therefore, the phrase “*and it came into his innards like water*” is referring to the act of drinking water. **Rather, Rav Ashi said: Bathing is derived from the same verse cited above, as it is written:**

ג לָהֶם חֲמָדוֹת לֹא אָכַלְתִּי, וּבָשָׂר וַיֵּנֶן לֹא-בָא  
אֶל-פִּי--וְסוּף לֹא-סָכַמְתִּי: עַד-מְלֵאת, שְׁלֹשֶׁת  
שָׁבָעִים יָמִים. {פ}

3 I ate no pleasant bread, neither came flesh nor wine in my mouth, neither did I anoint myself at all, till three whole weeks were fulfilled.

Dan 10:3

“*Neither did I anoint myself at all*” (Daniel 10:3). This teaches that Daniel did not do any anointing, including bathing. Consequently, the same source prohibits both of these activities.

מֵאֵי: "וַאֲנִי בָאתִי בְדַבְרֶיךָ?" הֵיִינוּ דְכָתִיב: "וְשָׁבָעִים אִישׁ מִזְקְנֵי [בֵּית] יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיֵּאָזְנֶהוּ בֶן שָׁפָן עוֹמֵד בְּתוֹכָם עוֹמְדִים לְפָנֶיהֶם וְאִישׁ מִקְטָרְתּוֹ בִּידוֹ וְעַתָּה עָנֵן הַקְטוֹרֶת עֲלֶיהָ." "וַיִּשְׁלַח תְּבִנִית יָד וַיִּקְחֵנִי בְצִיצַת רֹאשִׁי וַתִּשָּׂא אוֹתִי רוּחַ בֵּין הָאָרְצִים וּבֵין הַשָּׁמַיִם וַתָּבֵא אוֹתִי יְרוּשָׁלַיִם בְּמַרְאוֹת אֱלֹהִים אֶל פֶּתַח שַׁעַר הַפְּנִימִית הַפּוֹנֶה צְפוֹנָה אֲשֶׁר

Apropos the verses from Daniel, the Gemara asks: **What** did the angel mean when he said to Daniel:

יב וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלַי, אֶל-תִּירָא דְנִינְאָל--כִּי מִן-הַיּוֹם הָרִאשׁוֹן אֲשֶׁר נָתַתְּ לְבָבְךָ לְהִבִּין וּלְהִתְעַנּוֹת לְפָנַי אֱלֹהֶיךָ, נִשְׁמְעוּ דְבָרֶיךָ; וַאֲנִי-בָאתִי, בְּדַבְרֶיךָ.

12 Then said he unto me: 'Fear not, Daniel; for from the first day that thou didst set thy heart to understand, and to humble thyself before thy God, thy words were heard; and I am come because of thy words.

Dan 10:12

“*And I have come due to your words*”? From this, it seems that the angel was able to come only because of Daniel. The Gemara answers: **This is as it is written:**

יא וְשָׁבָעִים אִישׁ מִזְקְנֵי בֵּית-יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיֵּאָזְנֶהוּ בֶן-שָׁפָן עוֹמֵד בְּתוֹכָם, עוֹמְדִים

11 And there stood before them seventy men of the elders of the house of Israel, and in the midst of them

לפניהם, ואיש מקטרתו, בידו; ועמר  
ענו-הקטרת, עלה.

stood Jaazaniah the son of Shaphan, every man with his  
censer in his hand; and a thick cloud of incense went up.

Ezek 8:11

*“And there stood before them seventy men of the Elders of the house of Israel, and Jaazaniah, son of Shaphan, standing in the midst of them, each man with his censer in his hand, and a thick cloud of incense went up”*

Ezekiel saw the Elders of the house of Israel worshipping foreign gods. **“And the form of a hand was put forth, and I was taken by a lock of my head; and a spirit lifted me up between the earth and the heaven, and brought me in the visions of God to Jerusalem, to the door of the gate of the inner court that faces northward where**

שם מושב סמל הקנאה המקנה, “ויבא אותי אל חצר בית ה'  
הפנימית והנה פתח היכל ה' בין האולם ובין המזבח כעשרים  
ונחמשה איש אחוריהם אל היכל ה' ופניהם קדמה והמה משתחוים  
קדמה לשמש”. ממשמע שנאמר “ופניהם קדמה”, איני יודע  
שאחוריהם אל היכל ה' אלא, מה תלמוד לומר “אחוריהם אל  
היכל ה' — מלמד שהיו פורעין עצמן והיו מתרזין כלפי מטה.

*there was the seat of the image of jealousy, which provokes jealousy”*

טז ויבא אותי, אל-חצר בית-יהנה  
הפנימית, והנה-פתח היכל יהנה בין  
האולם ובין המזבח, כעשרים ונחמשה  
איש; אחוריהם אל-היכל יהנה, ופניהם  
קדמה, והמה משתחוים קדמה,  
לשמש.

16 And He brought me into the inner court of the LORD'S house, and, behold, at the door of the temple of the LORD, between the porch and the altar, were about five and twenty men, with their backs toward the temple of the LORD, and their faces toward the east; and they worshipped the sun toward the east.

Ezek 8:16

*“And he brought me into the inner court of the Lord’s House, and behold at the opening of the Entrance Hall of the Sanctuary of God, between the porch and the altar were about twenty-five men with their backs toward the Temple of the Lord, and their faces toward the east, and they worshipped the sun toward the east”*

The Gemara explains: **From the fact that it is stated “and their faces toward the east,” is it not clear that their backs were to the Sanctuary, which is in the west? Rather, what is the**



meaning when the verse states “*their backs toward the Temple of the Lord*”? This teaches that they would uncover themselves and defecate downward, toward the Divine Presence. The verse used a euphemism to refrain from vulgar language.

אָמַר לוֹ הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא לְמִיכָאֵל: מִיכָאֵל! סָרְחָה אוֹמְתָךְ. אָמַר  
לְפָנָיו: רַבּוֹנוֹ שֶׁל עוֹלָם, דְּיֵי לְטוֹבִים שְׁפָהֶם! אָמַר לוֹ: אֲנִי שׂוֹרֵף אוֹתָם  
וְלְטוֹבִים שְׁפָהֶם, מִיָּד: וַיֹּאמֶר (לְאִישׁ) לְבוֹשׁ הַבְּדִים וַיֹּאמֶר בּוֹא אֶל  
בֵּינֹת לַגְּלָגֶל אֶל תַּחַת לְכְרוּב וּמִלֵּא חֲפָנֶיךָ גַּחְלֵי אֵשׁ מִבֵּינֹת  
לְכְרוּבִים וְזָרוּק עַל הָעִיר וַיָּבֵא לְעֵינָי. מִיָּד: וַיִּשְׁלַח הַכְּרוּב אֶת יָדוֹ  
מִבֵּינֹת לְכְרוּבִים אֶל הָאֵשׁ אֲשֶׁר בֵּינֹת הַכְּרוּבִים וַיִּשָּׂא וַיִּתֵּן אֶל חֲפָנָי  
לְבוֹשׁ הַבְּדִים וַיִּקַּח וַיֵּצֵא.”

The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to Michael, the ministering angel of the Jewish people: Michael, your nation has sinned (see Daniel 10:21). He replied: Master of the Universe, may it be enough for the good people among them to save them from destruction. He said to him: I will burn them and the good among them because the good do not rebuke the wicked. Immediately, God spoke to Gabriel:

ב וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל-הָאִישׁ לְבוֹשׁ הַבְּדִים, וַיֹּאמֶר בֹּא אֶל-בֵּינֹת לַגְּלָגֶל אֶל-תַּחַת לְכְרוּב וּמִלֵּא חֲפָנֶיךָ גַּחְלֵי-אֵשׁ מִבֵּינֹת לְכְרוּבִים, וְזָרוּק, עַל-הָעִיר; וַיָּבֵא, לְעֵינָי.

2 And He spoke unto the man clothed in linen, and said: 'Go in between the wheelwork, even under the cherub, and fill both thy hands with coals of fire from between the cherubim and dash them against the city.' And he went in in my sight.

Ezek 10:2

*“He spoke to the man clothed in linen and said: Go in between the wheelwork and beneath the cherub, and fill your hands with coals of fire from between the cherubs, and scatter them over the city; and he came before my eyes”*

Immediately:

ז וַיִּשְׁלַח הַכְּרוּב אֶת-יָדוֹ מִבֵּינֹת לְכְרוּבִים, אֶל-הָאֵשׁ אֲשֶׁר בֵּינֹת הַכְּרוּבִים, וַיִּשָּׂא וַיִּתֵּן, אֶל-חֲפָנָי לְבוֹשׁ הַבְּדִים; וַיִּקַּח, וַיֵּצֵא.

7 And the cherub stretched forth his hand from between the cherubim unto the fire that was between the cherubim, and took thereof, and put it into the hands of him that was clothed in linen, who took it and went out.

Ezek 10:7

“And the cherub stretched out his hand from between the cherubs into the fire that was between the cherubs, and took and put it into the hands of him that was clothed in linen, who took it and went out”

אָמַר רַב חָנָא בַר בִּיזְנָא אָמַר רַבִּי שִׁמְעוֹן חֲסִידָא: אֵילְמָלָא לֹא  
נִצְטַנְנּוּ גְחָלִים מִיָּדוֹ שֶׁל כְּרוּב לְיָדוֹ שֶׁל גַּבְרִיאֵל — לֹא נִשְׁתַּיִּירוּ  
מִשׁוֹנְאֵיהֶן שֶׁל יִשְׂרָאֵל שְׂרִיד וּפְלִיט.

Rav Hana bar Bizna said that Rabbi Shimon Ḥasida said: If it were not for the fact that the embers cooled as they were passed from the hand of the cherub to the hand of Gabriel, instead of Gabriel taking the embers directly himself as he had been told, not a remnant or a refugee of the enemies of the Jewish people, a euphemism for the Jewish people themselves, would have survived. The cooling of the embers limited the punishment.

וְכַתִּיב: "וְהִנֵּה הָאִישׁ לְבוּשׁ הַבְּדִים אֲשֶׁר הִקְסֹת בְּמַתְנֵיוֹ מְשִׁיב דָּבָר  
לֵאמֹר עָשִׂיתִי כְּאֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתָנִי". אָמַר רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן: בְּאוֹתָהּ שָׁעָה הוֹצִיאוּ  
לְגַבְרִיאֵל מֵאַחֲוָרֵי הַפָּרְגוֹד, וּמְחִיוּהוּ שִׁיתִין פּוּלְסֵי דְנוּרָא. אָמְרוּ לֵיהּ:  
אִי לָא עֲבַדְתָּ — לָא עֲבַדְתָּ, אִי עֲבַדְתָּ — אַמַּאי לָא עֲבַדְתָּ?  
כְּדַפְקְדוּךָ? וְעוֹד: דְּעֲבַדְתָּ, לִית לָךְ אִין מְשִׁיבִין עַל הַקְּלָקְלָהּ?

The Gemara continues. And it is written:

יא וְהִנֵּה הָאִישׁ לְבוּשׁ הַבְּדִים, אֲשֶׁר הִקְסֹת בְּמַתְנֵיוֹ, מְשִׁיב דָּבָר, לֵאמֹר: עָשִׂיתִי, כְּאֲשֶׁר (כָּל אֲשֶׁר) צִוִּיתָנִי. {פ} 11 And, behold, the man clothed in linen, who had the inkhorn on his side, reported, saying: 'I have done according to all that Thou hast commanded me.'

Ezek 9:11

“And behold, the man clothed in linen with the slate by his side, reported the matter saying: I have done as You have commanded me” Rabbi Yoḥanan said: At that moment, they cast out Gabriel from behind the curtain [pargod], where the inner angels reside, and they struck him with sixty blows [pulsei] of fire. They said to him: If you did not do it, you did not do it; if you did do it, why did you not do it according to what you were commanded but deviated from what you were instructed to do?

Moreover, after you already did it, do you not have knowledge of the principle: **One should not deliver** a report **about destruction**? If one is sent on a mission of destruction, he should not deliver a detailed report of its success but should only hint at it.

RASHI

פולסא דנורא - מקלות של אור:

Steinzaltz

שיתין פולסי דנורא [והכזהו בשישים שבטים של אש]

## Summary

While discussing Daniel, the Gemara continues to tell stories from Daniel and also from Ezekiel. The stories involve the angel Gabriel. He notices the behaviour of others and he comments on what is just. Often he is ignored. Without a better background in Nevi'im and Ketuvim, I cannot assume that I understand what I have read.

Prooftexts help the rabbis to support their reasons of why refraining from bathing is considered an affliction. Generally, they turn to texts that suggest 'weariness' as the result of not bathing. As weariness is an affliction, we should not bathe on Yom Kippur. They also discuss the importance of wearing shoes without patches. But it is surprising to me that the rabbis decide that not bathing creates weariness. Now, I'm certain that the rabbis knew far more about waiting to wash than me - I take a shower every day, something probably unheard of in the time of our Sages. But wouldn't discomfort or odour (ie. community relationships) be more of a problem than weariness?

After using texts to prove that going barefoot is an affliction, the rabbis wonder about refraining from sex. Their first prooftext suggests that it is an affliction for women to be denied intercourse. Further, it causes suffering to take on multiple "rival" wives - an affliction. The rabbis even mention Genesis 41:2, where Shechem saw Dina, lay with her and afflicted her. The Gemara explains that this affliction was because Shechem was unnatural in his relations with her. Any woman reading this text would understand that sex is not pleasurable when it is forced. Sex without consent is an affliction. But women's consent was an alien concept in the times of the Temple, thus 'unnatural acts' account for Dina's discomfort.

The Gemara then qualifies these afflictions. Mud, blood and excrement can be washed from one's body as this act of bathing is not pleasurable. Shammai was stringent and would not wash even

one hand to prepare food for his children, which caused them to suffer. After the rules were changed, he washed both hands and prepared food for his children. Abaye mentions Shammai's fear of the spirit Shivta. Shivta lives on hands that have not been washed in the mornings.

The rabbis' belief in superstition; in evil demons and other powerful creatures seems absolutely antithetical to our modern understandings of Judaism. At the same time, their practice -- washing hands before preparing food or eating a meal -- is completely in line with our current beliefs. Perhaps this is part of the reason that our texts continue to live: they keep us in balance between mystery and logic.

Further, oil can be smeared for medicinal purposes - not for pleasure.

A person can guard his field or greet someone older/wiser even if it requires walking up to one's neck in the water of a river. As this is not swimming or bathing for pleasure, it is allowed. Although the rabbis find proof that the water should only reach one's ankles or waist, Abaye steps in to assert that in still water where there is less risk of drowning, the water can be much higher.

The Gemara explains other verses from Ezekiel. In the future, what kind of boat will carry him across the river? The rabbis look for proof to convince each other that their arguments are valid. The daf ends with a new conversation regarding the water that flows under the Temple and its status in the future.

## SIXTY PULSES OF FIRE

**Rav Mordechai Kornfeld** writes:<sup>1</sup>

As a punishment for not properly carrying out his duty, the angel Gavriel was punished with "sixty bursts of fire." The Gemara in other places mentions this punishment in reference to angels (see, for example, Chagigah 15a and Bava Metzia 85b). What is the significance of sixty lashes?

to one opinion in the Rishonim, "Makos Mardus" -- lashes mandated by the Rabanan for transgression of a rabbinical prohibition, are comprised of only 13 lashes, instead of 39 which comprise Malkus d'Oraisa (**TASHBETZ** 2:51, citing **RASHI** in Yevamos 52a; **SHILTEI**

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.dafyomi.co.il/yoma/insites/yo-dt-077.htm>



**GIBORIM** on the Mordechai to Bava Basra, end of Perek Yesh Nochlim, citing **RABEINU TAM**).

The **TERUMAS HA'DESHEN** (in Bi'urim on the Torah, end of Parshas Ki Setzei, as cited by the **BACH** on the Rif to Kesuvos, page 16b of the pages of the Rif; see also **MAGEN AVRAHAM OC** 496:2) explains this opinion as follows. The Mishnah in Makos (22a-b) describes the 39 lashes of Malkus d'Oraisa as three sets of 13 lashes. Two sets are administered on the person's back and one set on his chest. The Terumas ha'Deshen explains that this means that the actual number of lashes that should be administered is only 13, to correspond to the first 13 years of a person's life during which he is expected to learn to make the proper decisions. If he sins, this shows that he failed to learn to make the proper decisions as he was maturing, and thus he is punished with 13 lashes. However, the Torah prescribes two additional sets of 13 lashes on two other parts of his body as an additional penalty. (One set of lashes is given opposite his heart, the place where his thoughts originate, and two sets are given opposite his two kidneys, which counsel the body as to what actions to take.) The Rabanan do not have the prerogative to add two extra sets of lashes because their enactments themselves are already added penalties or restrictions, and the Rabanan cannot impose one penalty on top of another. Therefore, for the transgression of an Isur d'Rabanan only 13 lashes are administered.

A similar logic applies to punishments administered to angels. Although a person becomes accountable for his actions with regard to punishments in the hands of the worldly Beis Din at the age of 13, he is not accountable with regard to punishments at the hand of the "heavenly court" until the age of 20 (Shabbos 89b). Hence, when the heavenly court administers Malkus, it is in the form of 20 lashes repeated three times (like the lashes of the worldly courts), for a total of 60 lashes.

**Steinzaltz (OBM)** writes:<sup>2</sup>

The Mishnah at the beginning of the *perek* (73b) enumerated five specific activities that are forbidden on *Yom Kippur* in order to fulfill *inuy* – the commandment to reach a sense of suffering or oppression. Therefore, most of these activities are forbidden only if they are done for pleasure. Thus, the *baraita* on our *daf* teaches that someone who is dirty is allowed to wash himself and someone who has sores on his body can anoint them with oil. Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel is quoted as teaching that a woman who needs to feed her children can wash one hand so that she can give them food.

The *baraita* continues with a story about Shamai ha-Zaken, who did not want to feed his child on *Yom Kippur*, and the Sages ordered him to wash both hands and feed him.

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.ou.org/life/torah/masechet\\_yoma\\_7278/](https://www.ou.org/life/torah/masechet_yoma_7278/)

Most of the commentaries explain that Shamaï ha-Zaken was reluctant to rely on the “leniency” and wash his hand. The Sages ruled that he should therefore wash both his hands, because they wanted to emphasize that, in this case, there was no prohibition at all. The Ritva points out that there are several similar cases in the Talmud, where the Sages went beyond the letter of the law in order to emphasize the correct ruling. Rabbeinu Yehonatan understands this case differently. He argues that Shamaï ha-Zaken was concerned lest he touch the food with his unwashed hand, so he refrained from feeding his children entirely. The Sages reacted to this by permitting him to wash both hands.

What was the great concern about touching food?

The Gemara quotes Abaye as explaining that the Sages were afraid of *shivta*. Rashi explains that *shivta* is a *ru'ach ra'ah* – an evil spirit. According to the responsa literature from the period of the Geonim, *shivta* was a disease that affected mainly babies and younger children. From the descriptions that appear in the Gemara it seems likely that it is some type of contagious infection that can be carried by dirty hands.

**Mark Kerzner** writes:<sup>3</sup>

To prove that abstaining from washing and anointing oneself is called an affliction, the Talmud quotes verses from Daniel, who afflicted himself in this way. It then continues with these verses, which tell the story of the angel Gabriel being expelled from the Heavenly court but brought back “because of the words of Daniel”.

Daniel was shown in a vision that twenty five people were standing in the Temple, bowing to the sun in the east, with the backs toward the Temple on the west. Since their faces were to the east, we already know that their backs were to the west, why is this mentioned? The real story was that they bared themselves and defecated toward the Temple as an additional sign of contempt. The Holy One Blessed be He said to the angel Michael, “Your nation has sinned!” Michael suggested to spare the nation because of the good ones among them, but the answer was, “I will burn them together with the good ones who did not protest.” At this time Gabriel asked another angel, a Cherub, to bring the coals, took those coals and threw them on Jerusalem. However, since the coals cooled somewhat, the nation survived. They gave Gabriel sixty fiery lashes (*pulsa dânura*) and expelled him. Gabriel continued arguing on behalf of the Jewish people, and when he mentioned Daniel, the Holy One Blessed be He asked, “Who is he that is advocating on behalf of my children?” - and Gabriel was brought back. As a result, however, Persians, and especially later Greeks, were given dominion.

Nevertheless, if one wants to visit his father or his teacher on Yom Kippur, and a river separates them, he is allowed to cross even if the water reaches his neck. He is even allowed to go back, since otherwise in the future he will refrain from going. Only washing for pleasure is actually forbidden.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://talmudilluminated.com/yoma/yoma77.html>

## GABRIEL (גבריאל Γαβριήλ, "man of God")

**Solomon Schechter, Ludwig Blau, and Emil G. Hirsch** write:<sup>4</sup>

With Michael, Gabriel is mentioned by name in the Book of Daniel, where he explains to Daniel his visions (Dan. viii. 16-26, ix. 21-27). He appears to Zacharias, and announces to Mary that she is about to have a son whose name shall be "Jesus" (Luke i. 19-31). Gabriel is one of the four angels that stand at the four sides of God's throne and serve as guardian angels of the four parts of the globe (Enoch, ix. 1; comp. Kautzsch, "Die Apokryphen und Pseudepigraphen des Alten Testaments," ii. 240, note). The four angels, Michael, Gabriel, Uriel, and Raphael, who are still invoked in the evening prayer, are often mentioned together (Enoch, xl. 6, liv. 6; Sibyllines, ii. 214 *et seq.*; "Legend of Zechariah," vi. 2-6, in Lüken, "Michael: Eine Darstellung und Vergleichung der Jüdischen und Morgenländisch-Christlichen Tradition vom Erzengel Michael," p. 122, Göttingen, 1898). The four names also occur on a golden tablet found in the tomb of the wife of Emperor Honorius (Kopp, "Palæographia Critica," iii., § 158; "Apocryphische Fragen des Bartholomeus," in Lüken, *l.c.* p. 114; "Zauberpapyri," in Lüken, *l.c.* p. 71). In other passages seven archangels are mentioned, among them Gabriel (Tobit xii. 15, and elsewhere). But he is most often mentioned together with Michael, whom he follows in rank. A Gnostic gem bears the inscription in Greek: "Michael the highest, Gabriel the mightiest" (Kopp, *l.c.* iv., §, 766). The three angels that appeared to Abraham (Gen. xviii.) were Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael; Michael, as the greatest, walked in the middle, with Gabriel to his right and Raphael to his left (Yoma 37a). Michael stands at the right hand of God, Gabriel at His left (Jellinek, "B. H." v. 166). Throughout Jewish literature Michael appears as an angel of a higher degree, as may be seen in the passages quoted below. Gabriel has the form of a man (Dan. viii. 15, ix. 21), and is, according to the Talmud, the "man clothed with linen" mentioned in Ezek. ix. 3 and x. 2 (Yoma 77a).

### Represents Fire

Michael is snow, Gabriel is fire (Lüken, *l.c.* p. 55; comp. Yoma 21b, bottom). Nevertheless, it is the prince of fire and not the prince of ice that is commissioned to rescue Abraham as well as Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah from the fiery furnace (Pes. 118a; Ex. R. xviii. and parallel passage). In a single passage only (Targ. Job xxv. 2), Michael is called the prince of fire, and Gabriel the prince of water. As prince of fire Gabriel is also prince of the ripening of fruits (Sanh. 95b). As an angel representing an element of nature he is also connected with the metals: Gabriel is gold (the color of fire), Michael is silver (snow), Uriel is copper (Yalk., Ḥadash, s.v. "Gabriel," No.75). Gabriel, girded like a metal-worker, shows Moses how to make the candlestick (Men. 29a). He has wings, like all the angels, but while Michael reaches the earth in one flight, Gabriel requires two (Ber. 4b, bottom).

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<sup>4</sup> <https://jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/6450-gabriel>

## Activities and Qualities

Michael and Gabriel often work together (see Pes. 55a; Lüken, *l.c.* p. 86, note 1; *ib.* p. 109, bottom; Origen, "Contra Celsum," viii. 13; and elsewhere), but while Michael, as the guardian angel of Israel and high priest of heaven, is more occupied in heaven, Gabriel is the messenger of God, who executes God's will on earth. In heaven Gabriel is set over the serpents, and over paradise and the cherubim (Enoch, xx.). Each of the four divisions of the twelve tribes of Israel had its guardian angel, namely, Michael, Gabriel, Uriel, and Raphael respectively (Num. R. ii. 10). Michael and Gabriel defend Israel against its accusers (Yalk., Ḥadash, 67b), and pray in general for the human race and for Israel's deliverance from captivity ("Apoc. Pauli," in Lüken, *l.c.* p. 86, note 4; Jellinek, *l.c.* v. 127). They defend Israel when God orders the Temple to be burned (Yalk. ii., No. 1009). Gabriel destroys the bastards (Enoch, x. 9); with the other three arch-angels he seizes Semyaza and his companions and casts them into the fire (Enoch, liv. 6). He will make war upon the leviathan (B. B. 74b). He leads the soul into the body of the pious (Yalk., Ḥadash, 68b, No. 65).

## Gabriel in Legend

In addition to the cases mentioned above, Gabriel frequently acts as God's instrument. After appearing to Abraham with the other two angels, he went to destroy Sodom and save Lot (B. M. 86b). Satan (Samael), desiring that Tamar might be burned and that David might not be her descendant, removed the signs by means of which she afterward proved her innocence (Gen. xxxviii.); Gabriel having restored them (Soṭah 10b). Gabriel taught Joseph the seventy languages of the world (*ib.* 36b); he led Jochebed to Amram (Yalk., Ḥadash, s.v. **מיטה**, No. 60); when the handmaidens of Pharaoh's daughter wished to dissuade her from saving Moses, Gabriel struck them down (*ib.* 12b). When Solomon married a daughter of one of the Pharaohs Gabriel thrust a reed into the sea; mud gathered around it, and Rome was built on that site (Shab. 55b). He closed the gate behind the Shebna mentioned in Isa. xxii. 15 (Sanh. 26a), and slew Sennacherib (*ib.* 95b). Fortunately for Israel, he hindered Nebuchadnezzar from worshipping God (*ib.* 96a). Taking fire from the hand of the cherub, he threw it upon the Temple and city (Yoma 77a). He put an ink-mark upon the forehead of the pious, and one of blood upon that of the impious (Shab. 55a; comp. Ezek. ix. 4). He prevented Queen Vashti from appearing before Ahasuerus, and rewrote the story of the services rendered by Mordecai to the king, the record of which Shimshai had destroyed (Meg. 12b, 16a). He struck down the judges who refused to side with Simon b. Shetaḥ against King Alexander Jannai (Sanh. 19b).

The foregoing description of Gabriel shows no details that need be regarded as having been borrowed from Parseeism or other sources. Gabriel disputes like a scribe with Michael as to the stone indicated by "kadmōd" (Isa. liv. 12; B. B. 75a; comp. Yalk., Ḥadash, 67a, No. 27: Michael and Gabriel are like the Shammites and Hillelites). "Pray not to Michael nor to Gabriel, but to Me, and I will immediately answer" (Yer. Ber. 13a): in contrast to later Christianity, Judaism entirely forbade the worship of angels, though this view was modified in the Middle Ages. Gabriel also plays an important rôle on Basilidian gems, in the magic papyri, among the Christians, and among the Mohammedans. "In Christianity, as in Judaism, Gabriel stands nearest to Michael, but

does not equal him in rank" (Lüken, "Michael," pp. 32, 111 *et seq.*). Gabriel still lives in the imagination of the Jewish, the Christian, and the Mohammedan people.

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### **—In Arabic Literature:**

Gabriel, under the name of "Jibril" (for variants in spelling and vocalizations see Baiḍawi), is mentioned by name in only two passages of the Koran: suras ii. 91, 92; lxvi. 4. But according to the commentators, he is alluded to elsewhere in the words "Ruḥ al-Ḳuds" = "Holy Spirit" (ii. 81, 254; v. 109; vi. 104); in "al-Ruḥ al-Amin" = "Faithful Spirit" (xxvi. 193); in "Shadid al-Ḳuwwah" = "the Terrible in Power" (liii. 5); and in "Rasul Karim" = "Noble Messenger" (lxxxii. 19). According to Baiḍawi, the name signifies "servant of God." Gabriel revealed the Koran to Mohammed, and, according to Arabic writers (Bukhari, Baiḍawi, Zamakhshari), was therefore considered by the Jews to be their enemy, a conception resented by the Prophet in the declaration (ii. 91) that Gabriel's enemies are God's enemies. The three letters "alef," "lam," "mim," which precede many of the suras, are explained by Ibn 'Abbas (see Baiḍawi on sura ii. 1) as indicating that Gabriel is the medium of revelation between God and Mohammed, the "alef" standing for "Allah," the "lam" for "Gabriel," and the "mim" for "Mohammed." It was Gabriel who brought to Mohammed the command "Iḳra" (recite) as recorded in sura xcvi. For this reason the angel is regarded by the Arabs as the "keeper of the heavenly treasures [of revelation]". He is one of the "al-Muḳarrabin," the angels that approach God. With three other angels, he will survive on the last day, death overtaking all other creatures.

### **Messenger of God**

As "messenger of God" Gabriel assisted in the creation of Adam by gathering under divine orders all the kinds of clay from which the first man's body was fashioned. After their expulsion from paradise, it was he who took pity on Adam and Eve; bringing to them a small sack of wheat, he taught them how to sow and cultivate the grain. He also gave Adam an ox wherewith to plow (see 21st treatise of Ikhwan al-Ṣafa [ed. Dieterici], Ṭabari, and Ibn al-Athir). Ṭabari further ascribes to him the transmission to Adam of the knowledge of making fire by striking stone and iron together. When Abraham was to be thrown into the fierce fire prepared for him by Nimrod (in the Midrash it is a hot furnace: Gen. R. xxxviii.) Gabriel intervened. Abraham, who was shot into the air by a catapult or ballista, would have fallen into the flames had the angel not held him in mid air (Zamakhshari and Baiḍawi).



## Visits Abraham

As in Jewish accounts (Midr. Leḳaḥ Ṭob, ed. Buber, i. 82; B. M. 86b), Gabriel is in Arabic stories one of the three angels, Gabriel, Michael, and Israfil (the Jewish Uriel), that visited Abraham (comp. the commentaries to sura xi. 72). Ṭabari amplifies the account. Asked by the patriarch why they would not eat of the food placed before them, they declared that they must first be told the price of the meal. Abraham replied, "For this meal the price consists in your praising God," whereupon Gabriel nodded approvingly, saying, "In very truth this man deserves to be styled the friend of God." Commenting on sura xi. 83, the account of Lot and the angels that came to him at Sodom to announce its punishment, Baiḍawi and Zamakhshari state that Gabriel struck the Sodomites with his wing (described at some length by Zamakhshari) so that they lost their sight. With the same wing, they report, referring to the next verse (xi. 84), Gabriel lifted the whole city to such a height toward the sky that the barking of the dogs and the crowing of the cocks were distinctly heard by the dwellers in heaven, and then, turning it upside down, dashed it to the earth.

Abraham, according to Ibn al-Athir, had begged Gabriel to save the city if but ten believers (Mohammedans) were discovered among the inhabitants. Gabriel had promised Abraham at least to accomplish the escape of Lot and his family with the exception of his wife. But finding in Lot's admissions the confirmation of God's indictment of the city as corrupt to the core Gabriel achieved Sodom's ruin in the manner before stated (see also Abulfeda, "Historia Ante-Islamitica," p. 24). In the story of Moses' mission to Pharaoh (sura xxviii.) Gabriel is assigned an important part by Arabic commentators. Zamakhshari, reverting to the tower which the Egyptian king had built to ascend to the God of Moses (xxviii. 38), reports that Gabriel struck it with his wing and split it into three parts, one falling on Pharaoh's army, killing one thousand times one thousand men, another sinking in the sea, and the third crashing to earth in a westerly direction, so that none of the builders escaped alive. When Pharaoh was about to drown he would have professed his belief in the God of Moses, but Gabriel took a handful of mud from the sea and stopped his mouth (Ṭabari and Ibn al-Athir). Gabriel boasted later of this act of his while talking to Mohammed, alleging as his motive his fear lest God might have been moved to have pity on Pharaoh.

In suras ii. 60, 87; iv. 153; and vii. 170 God is said to have threatened to overturn the mountain upon the Israelites if they did not accept the Law (comp. 'Ab. Zarah 2b; Shab. 88a). The Arabic commentators expand the incident. Israel proved refractory, whereupon Gabriel was bidden to lift up the mountain and hold it suspended over the heads of the people. Gabriel appeared to Moses to inform him that Og the giant (see Giants) had been rendered helpless by being caught in his own trap (a huge stone), and encouraged him to slay the king (Ṭabari, "Chroniques," transl. Zotenberg, i. 391). Gabriel was also the messenger that announced to David, who would not be consoled on account of his sin, that God had forgiven him. It was Gabriel who gathered all the demons from their various haunts, bringing them to Solomon, their new master (Kazwini, i. 351 *et seq.*).

## Intercedes for Isaac

In another account (Al-Kisa'i's "Histories of the Prophets") the birds are assembled by Gabriel to do homage to Solomon. It was he who brought Solomon's magic signet-ring from paradise, with the inscription "La Allah illa Allah wa-Muḥammad Rasul Allah"; the ring had once belonged to Adam. This event took place on a Friday, the 27th day of Muḥarram. Gabriel's feats are also

preserved in the popular literature of the Moriscos (see Grünbaum, "Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Sprach- und Sagenkunde"). Gabriel acted as notary at the wedding of Adam and Eve (comp. Gen. R.). He induced Abraham to take Hagar to wife. He substituted the ram for Isaac on Moriah, and bade Abraham desist from his purpose of sacrificing his son. He announced to Sarah the birth of Isaac. Joseph, while in prison, was instructed by Gabriel that in the absence of water he might use sand to perform his ritual ablutions. In the "Legendas de José, Hijo de Jacob" (1888) Gabriel is mentioned as protecting Joseph when tempted by Potiphar's wife, the angel assuming the guise of Joseph's father. This occurs also in the works of Arabic authors (Tabari, Zamakhshari). Joseph's coat, according to Zamakhshari and Baiḍawi, was a present from Gabriel, who had woven it of celestial silk for Abraham when he was about to be thrown into the furnace; Abraham had given it to Isaac; Isaac to Jacob, who bound it like an amulet round Joseph's neck. Gabriel appeared before Joseph, unrolled it, and clothed him with it. Gabriel, by telling a little child in a cradle to arise and testify in Joseph's favor, established the latter's innocence when accused by Potiphar's wife. Joseph was in prison so long because, as Gabriel informed him, he had put more faith in men than in God. According to the commentators, Gabriel prevented Joseph from writing to his father because Jacob was to be punished for a former trifling sin (comp. B. K. 50a).

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# Pulsa diNura

## Etymology

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*Pulsa* (plural: *pulsei*) is an Aramaic noun derived from the Latin word *pulsus* meaning a "blow" or "stroke". *Nura* is an Aramaic noun meaning "fire".

## Sources

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The phrase *pulsa dinura* appears in several stories in classical rabbinic literature (though not with the meaning of a mystical curse):

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<sup>5</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pulsa\\_diNura](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pulsa_diNura)

- Adam told Rabbi Akiva that angels were beating him with a stick of fire in punishment for his sins. (2)
- God punished the angel Metatron with *pulsei denura* for having misled Elisha ben Abuyah. (3)
- God punished the angel Gabriel with *pulsei denura* for not performing his task properly when Jerusalem was destroyed. Our Daf (3)
- Elijah was punished in heaven with *pulsei denura* for having disclosed a heavenly secret to humankind. (4)
- Rava said that if Levi ben Sisi were alive, he would strike with *pulsei denura* another rabbi who had misrepresented his opinion. (5)
- The term is mentioned once in the *Zohar*, where it is described as a heavenly punishment against a person who does not fulfill their religious obligations.

Some adherents of Kabbalah developed the idea of invoking a curse against a sinner, which they termed *pulsa deNura*. The source for this modern ritual is not to be found in Kabbalah, but among the Hebrew magical manuals of antiquity, such as *Sefer HaRazim* and *The Sword of Moses*.

In contrast to the ceremony, Judaism discourages praying that an evil person die, and instead recommends praying that the person repent and cease their evil deeds.

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2. ^ Hagigah 15a
3. ^ Yoma 77a
4. ^ Bava Metzia 85b
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8. ^ Brachot 10a

## The Original Pulsa Denura

**Shahar Ilan** writes:<sup>6</sup>

Pulsa denura is commonly considered the most severe of kabbalistic curses. According to descriptions found in books and the media, ten righteous kabbalists gather at midnight in a synagogue, by the light of black candles, blow shofars and recite the curse. If the curse has been uttered by worthy and righteous men and against an appropriate target, the target is supposed to die within the year. If it has been uttered by unworthy persons or against a target who has not sinned, the curse is supposed to have a boomerang effect.

Among the persons against whom the pulsa denura has been recited, or at least against whom its use has been threatened: the late prime minister Yitzhak Rabin, current Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz, the late Jerusalem mayor Gershon Agron and the

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.haaretz.com/1.4853346>

incumbent mayor, Uri Lupolianski. It is doubtful if any Israeli public figure could be considered truly high-ranking without a *pulsa denura* being invoked against him at least once - in a synagogue or at least in a press leak.

Despite all this, an article in the religion supplement of the independent ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) weekly *Mishpacha* recently claimed that there is, in fact, no such thing. The two authors of the article, Dr. Dov Schwartz of Bar-Ilan University and Haredi activist Moshe Blau, spoke at length with three high-ranking kabbalists, and received the answers: "I don't know of it," "I've never heard of any such thing," and "There is no such curse in the Torah."

The two writers have made a study of the places in which the term *pulsa denura* appears in the sources, and have found that it is usually a reference to divine punishment imposed by God on angels, and not a curse or banishment from the community. Among the literal interpretations found for the expression: Ball of fire, whip of fire, burst of fire.

The two researchers reached the conclusion that the *pulsa denura* invoked today is merely a new and particularly frightening version of an excommunication edict, a ceremony that also incorporates extinguishing candles, blowing shofars in synagogue and reciting a curse. Excommunication does not really frighten secular Jews. In the final analysis, what do they care if the Haredim ostracize them? After Israel's establishment, the term *pulsa denura* replaced excommunication.

The researchers did not identify who gave excommunication its new name. But so as not to hold the reader in suspense, we will note that use of the curse in the early days of the state was usually attributed to religious struggles in Jerusalem that involved the leader of the anti-Zionist *Neturei Karta* movement, Amram Blau.

"*Pulsa denura* is not a kabbalistic ceremony," they concluded. "Kabbalists do not take part in it, it is not done at midnight but rather at midday - not after a fast of three days, not to the light of black candles, the text is not read seven times, and the persons do not necessarily stand facing the east." In any event, the writers seemed to have a good time making fun of the secular, who "although they do not believe in the Creator of the World or his Torah, believe - and how - in *pulsa denura*."

## **To hand over or not to hand over**

In the Haredi book of transgressions, handing someone over to the authorities - informing - is one of the most serious offenses. This is a relic of the days when the non-Jewish ruler was considered an enemy, and a Jew who informed on his fellow Jew was placing him in mortal danger. Therefore, it was determined that someone who handed someone over to the authorities was considered a *rodef*, one who endangers the life of a Jew. The very friendly Diaspora in the United States, and the need to cooperate with American legal authorities, created an ongoing challenge for the rabbis. Is U.S. non-Jewish law equivalent to the "Polish landlord" law? And is it really forbidden to inform on someone?

A new ruling by Rabbi Yosef Shalom Elyashiv appears in *Yeshurun*, a compendium of articles on halacha (Jewish religious law), in which the rabbi says it is permissible, in certain cases, to hand

over a child abuser to the American police. Elyashiv, considered the most important interpreter of halakha by Ashkenazi Haredim, said that it was permitted to inform the government in cases in which, "It is clear that he has committed a foul deed, and that this [informing] constitutes a sort of repair of the world." Elyashiv adds another condition, according to which the situation must be that, "Someone is abusing a boy or girl such that we are unable to stop him from continuing his evil actions."

Nevertheless, he cautions that the permit does not apply "in cases in which the story is totally unsubstantiated, but is only a figment of someone's imagination. If we permit this (in other words, informing on someone on the basis of rumor - S.I.), not only does this not constitute repair of the world, but it destroys the world, and possibly due to some feeling of bitterness by a pupil toward the teacher, falsely accuses the teacher, and I cannot see any reason to sanction it."

Elyashiv's willingness to permit cooperation with U.S. authorities shrinks when it comes to parental abuse of children. This has to do with the concern that the child will be removed from his parents' home and given to a foster family that is either Christian or secular. "There is no doubt that this would harm the soul of the child, even if for a short while," writes Elyashiv, who instructed that Torah sages must be consulted in every case of parental abuse.

### **Cherlow's limit**

At what point would the national-religious public cease to view the State of Israel as its state? In the past few months, more and more voices have said that the disengagement is the fault line.

Rabbi Yuval Cherlow, the head of the hesder yeshiva in Petah Tikva and one of the more important young rabbis in the national-religious camp, offered another, quite surprising, answer. "At least for me, the limit - in terms of connection to the state, is when the state decides that it does not wish to be a Jewish state,"

Cherlow said in an interview with Bimahshava Techila (At First Thought), a bulletin published by "Realistic Religious Zionism," a movement of young religious people that fights against the national-religious public's exclusive focus on issues related to the Greater Land of Israel. Cherlow also offered examples of measures that could cause a rupture: "Abolishment of the Law of Return - in particular abolishment of the Law of Return - abolishment of the Hebrew calendar, abolishment of Hebrew as an official language." He makes it clear that in his opinion, the disengagement is not a reason not to celebrate Independence Day.

Regarding the Supreme Court's decision ordering the acceptance by the Interior Ministry of conversions to Judaism of Israeli residents performed by non-Orthodox rabbis residing abroad, Cherlow wrote, "You have to bear in mind that the High Court of Justice issued its ruling because the Knesset avoided taking a stand, and you have to bear in mind that the Knesset avoided taking a stand because we in the religious Zionist world rebuffed the Neeman committee and opted for an all or nothing approach. Because religious Zionism opted for an all or nothing approach, it is getting nothing."





## The Shoah Scroll

The Orthodox response to the Holocaust is far from uniform. For instance, Haredim object to the officially observed Holocaust Martyrs and Heroes Day (Yom Hashoah) due to its secular content and the fact that it falls in the month of Nisan, when mourning is forbidden. In addition, there is still no broadly accepted text for Holocaust Day such as exists for Tisha B'Av (the Book of Lamentations), the Passover seder (the Haggada) and Purim (the Book of Esther).

One group that has adopted Holocaust Day and is proposing a unique liturgical text is the Conservative movement, which this year published Megillat Hashoah (the Shoah Scroll), composed by literature professor Avigdor Shinan. The scroll completes the Conservative initiative to formulate an order of unique prayers for Holocaust Day. The introduction to the Shoah Scroll states, in the spirit of the Passover Haggada, that, "The new commandment of Jewish life is that each of us must see himself as if he has witnessed the Shoah with his own flesh."

The scroll contains six chapters, to commemorate the 6 million. Among the chapters: The testimony of a young Jewish man who was employed in a death camp disposing of bodies, and was forced to remove the gold teeth from the mouth of his dead brother, and the testimony of a Christian who sneaked into the Warsaw Ghetto. The scroll contends with the ultimate religious

question - where was God in the Holocaust? "Was this thing known in the heavens? Was all decreed by the Merciful God? - There is no voice and no answer, only infuriating silence."

In the same context, one of the Conservatives' prayers for Holocaust Day includes the statement, "We came to ask the questions that have no answer, but they cannot be left without a question." The president of the Conservative movement's Rabbinical Assembly, Rabbi Reuven Hammer, writes in the introduction to the scroll, "We must not say or teach that the Shoah was the will of God or a punishment that God imposed on us - it may be that we do not have an answer to the mysteries of the Shoah, but there are answers that we must completely reject."

The scroll ends with the following recommendations: "Do not mourn too much, but do not sink into the forgetfulness of apathy; do not let the Days of Darkness return - cry and also wipe away the tear; do not have mercy and do not forgive, do not try to understand; teach to live without response: by your blood you shall live."



**Activists performing a "Pulsa Dinura" against Yitzhak Rabin shortly before his death in 1995. (Nati Shohat)**

## **Cursing, and Running to Tell the Guys**

**Shahar Ilan** writes:<sup>7</sup>

The pulsa denura (a curse wishing the death of someone) ceremony long ago ceased to be a religious event and became a media event. In that respect, it underwent a very similar process to the procedure of filing a complaint with the Attorney General's Office.

The pulsa denura (a curse wishing the death of someone) ceremony long ago ceased to be a religious event and became a media event. In that respect, it underwent a very similar process to the procedure of filing a complaint with the Attorney General's Office. The complainants do not appeal to the attorney general as much as they are appealing to the media. The cursers are not appealing to God as much as they are appealing to reporters. It's unlikely they would go to the trouble if it did not get them a day and a half of headlines.

It should be recalled that the Haredi newspaper "Mishpacha" (Family) published three months ago the results of a study that found that there was no kabbalistic basis for the pulsa denura ceremony. It is a ceremony that was invented in the early years of Israel's statehood by one of the then-leaders of the Haredi public, who made an especially dramatic adaptation of the good old excommunication ceremony. Excommunication isn't such a scary matter, but pulsa denura sounds at least as mysterious as a voodoo rite. And all the rest is folklore.

The two authors of the Mishpacha article, Dr. Dov Schwartz of Bar-Ilan University and the Haredi public figure Moshe Blau, spoke with three noted kabbalists, and received the answers: "I'm not familiar with it," "I've never heard of such a thing," and "There's no such curse in the Torah."

The researchers conclude: "Pulsa denura is not a kabbalistic ceremony, kabbalists do not participate in it, it is not conducted at midnight, but rather at noon, not after a three-day fast, and not to the light of black candles."

The researchers say that those who claim they conducted a pulsa denura for Rabin are embellishing, because they don't understand what it's all about." Blau says that it is the same situation for the ceremony held for Sharon. The researchers don't miss the opportunity to poke fun at secular Jews, who "in spite of not believing in the Creator of the world and His Torah, believe oh so much in pulsa denura."

Why do people for whom a pulsa denura is held die? A. Because it happens to everyone, at times long after the curse was invoked. B. Because the ceremony is usually held for very old people. C. Because these people are very often being harassed, as well. D. At least in the case of Rabin, there was someone who did not rely on the curse and decided to verify the kill.

## **"Pulsa De-Nura": The Innovation of Modern Magic and Ritual**

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.haaretz.com/1.4925777?ts=1624366199535>



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Generally speaking, rituals similar to the *pulsa de-nura*<sup>16</sup> belong in the realm of practical Kabbalah.<sup>17</sup> In contrast to theoretical Kabbalah, which includes discourses concerning the structure and meaning of the mystical-divine world, in texts of practical Kabbalah one finds specific details and instructions on how to achieve some desired outcome in life. For example, Kabbalistic texts of a practical nature might include explanations on how to heal a sick person, predict the future, talk with the dead, induce a person to fall in love with you, rid a dangerous animal from your village, and the like, by means of magical rituals.<sup>18</sup> The ritual of *pulsa de-nura* would be<sup>19</sup> the type of procedure found within the texts of practical Kabbalah, with its purpose being to place a fatal curse upon the intended recipient. According to the description of the *pulsa de-nura* “ceremony” cited above, as well as in other instances where this ritual is found in popular literature,<sup>20</sup> the invokers of this curse petition for two things. First, they ask the protecting angel of the accursed to remove his protection (seeing as every person has a personal, protecting angel), and second, they request that divine angels of wrath take the life of the accursed.

According to the majority of popular sources,<sup>21</sup> this ritual must be conducted by a quorum of at least ten mystics<sup>22</sup> who gather in a synagogue at midnight after having fasted for three consecutive days. In the shadow of light cast by black candles, the mystics blow a *shofar* (ram’s horn) while intoning the words of the curse in front of an open ark, followed by the recitation of specific verses from the Book of Deuteronomy.<sup>23</sup> As soon as the curses are uttered, the candles are extinguished—a sign that the light of heaven has also been extinguished for the accursed.

As a starting point, I begin by investigating the following three major components:

- The term *pulsa de-nura* and its sources,
- The curse formula and text, and
- The surrounding ritual and all its elements

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<sup>8</sup> Modern Judaism , Feb., 2007, Vol. 27, No. 1 (Feb., 2007),

### *Pulsa De-Nura in the Talmud*

Talmudic sources mention the term a mere four times.<sup>39</sup> While in each case it seems to refer to a punishment of fiery lashes, in context the term does not seem to be intended as actual or physical chastisements. Rather, these lashes serve as some sort of metaphoric or spiritual retribution. Two of the usages are directed against non-human or celestial beings,<sup>40</sup> and the other two relate to human beings. However, one is directed against a deceased person and the other against a rabbi by his rabbinical colleague during a heated argument. The latter is clearly an expression of displeasure and in both cases, the term is used metaphorically or as a figure of speech.

After thorough investigation, we can categorically state that the ritual formula recited by the group of so-called "Kabbalists" in front of Prime Minister Rabin's house in November, 1995 as well as the one used against Prime Minister Sharon in the old cemetery of Rosh Pina on July, 2005 are not found in Talmudic literature whatsoever. While the term *pulsa de-nura* is utilized in Talmudic texts as an instrument of punishment against sinners, in every case it is meant to be taken in



a metaphorical, rather than realistic sense, and primarily seems to apply to non-living/non-humans in any case.

### *Pulsa De-Nura in the Zohar*

The term appears six times in Zoharic literature. It is mentioned once in its singular form (*pulsa de-nura*), and five times in its plural form, (*pulsei de-nura*). After close textual analysis of the different contexts in which it is placed within *The Book of the Zohar*, we found that the term is utilized in the following manner:

#### *Pulsa De-Nura as an Educational Tool*

In the only text containing the singular form of *pulsa de-nura*,<sup>41</sup> the author attempts to understand the idea of fear, specifically fear of God, within a mystical framework. Reading the passage in its proper context, it becomes clear that *pulsa de-nura* is meant to serve as an educational tool encouraging fear of God, which in turn, eventually leads to a love of God. Thus, in the broader context of this Zoharic discourse, *pulsa de-nura* is portrayed as a positive tool propelling people to a higher level of spiritual conduct, rather than as a tool of punishment.

#### *Pulsa De-Nura as a Protective Tool*

The first instance of the term's use in its plural form<sup>42</sup> comprises a story about Rabbi Simon, the main hero of *The Zohar*, who travels on a donkey while two of his students, Rabbi Abba and Rabbi Judah, walk by his side. As is customary in *The Zohar*, a whole discussion concerning the mystical understanding of the Bible ensues during which the term is used. In this context, the term *pulsei de-nura* is understood not as a tool of punishment, but rather as a tool of protection or as a weapon enabling the angel to accomplish his task, i.e., the task of serving the *Shekhinah* by keeping all of the external negative forces from clinging to her.

Similarly, in the second instance of its use in plural form,<sup>43</sup> sixty *pulsei de-nura* clothe the *Shekhinah*, serving as her "dress", so to speak, since they surround and shield her at all times. Here, in contrast to its treatment in the Talmud, *pulsei de-nura* are understood to be lights or powers that are used by the *Shekhinah* to reward the angelic being Metatron so that he may serve her properly.

In sum, we may conclude that *pulsei de-nura*—the lashes, whips, clubs, or rods of fire—as they are variously translated from Aramaic, serve a very different purpose in the texts of *The Zohar* than they do in the texts of the Talmud. Whereas in the Talmud they function as a means of punishment, in *The Zohar* they typically operate in a more positive fashion as tools of education, protection, and service, which ultimately lead to and create harmony in the worlds above that and below.

What makes this specific inquiry most important is the fact that there exists a widespread belief within the Jewish religious community that the origin of this mysterious “ritual” stems supposedly from *The Book of the Zohar*, the central book of Jewish mysticism. This association with *The Zohar* imbues it with considerable religious authority (both mystical and political) in the eyes of those who hold *The Zohar* in the highest regard. Consequently, a significant amount of power<sup>45</sup> has been granted those who have performed this ritual and those associated with the performers; hence, the importance of understanding and tracing its true sources.

For this reason, we have critically analyzed all the available sources relating to the term *pulsa de-nura* in the Talmudic, as well as the Zoharic literature in an attempt to disprove the supposition that this ritual is found in either the Talmud or *The Zohar*. Again, it must be categorically stated that in no place within the Talmud or *The Zohar* is there any discussion or even indication that this term refers to a ceremony, ritual, or curse whose purpose is to take life, human or otherwise.

If neither the Talmud nor *The Zohar* is the source of the *pulsa de-nura* ritual, then what is its source? To get closer to answering this question, let us turn now to the second of the three major components under investigation—an examination of the textual formula of the ritual.



## Wait...There Are Jewish Death Curses?

*Naftali Bennett just received one*

ADAM CHANDLER WRITES:<sup>9</sup>



I'll freely admit there are a lot of things I am ignorant of, but one thing I am stunned to be learning just now is that there are mystical Jewish curses. This comes up because Jewish Home leader Naftali Bennett just received a letter **claiming** that one had been put upon him for his policies that are less than popular among the ultra-Orthodox set.

The message arrived at Bennett's office on Wednesday and declared that the senders invoked a "Pulsa Dinura," or "lashes of fire," against him to bring about his early demise.

"You will die you., The Pulsa Dinura has been done to you," the letters read. It promised that Bennett would end his days like former prime minister Ariel Sharon, who has been in a coma since suffering a stroke in 2006.

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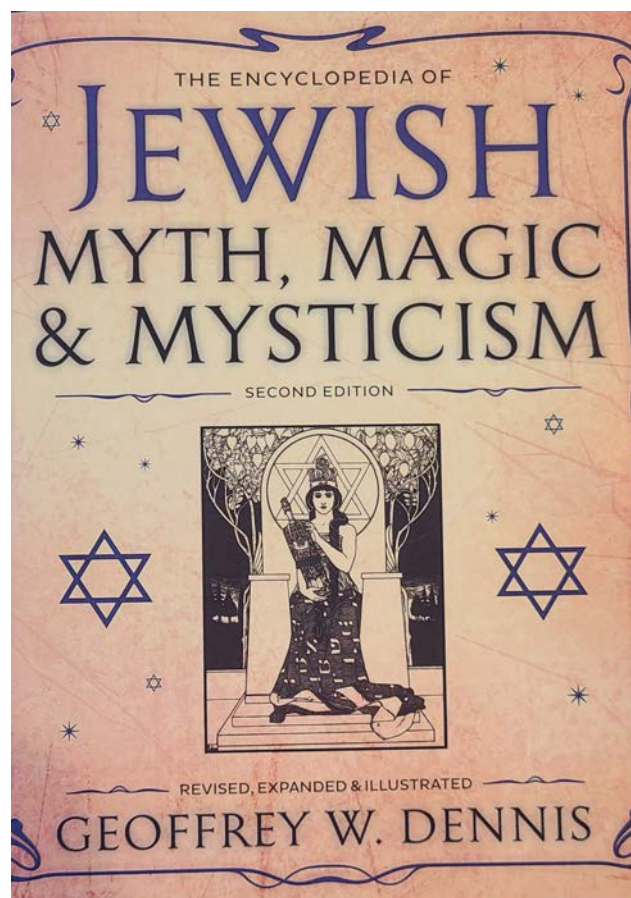
<sup>9</sup> <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/news/articles/wait-there-are-jewish-death-curses>

“Already, you will have no peace at home,” the letter continued. “A bitter life awaits you. From this day your life is ruined.”

I know this is frightening and morbid and all of that, but I’ve gotta say, this sort of sounds like a passive-aggressive fatwa to me. Some **very light research** on the topic reveals that it is purportedly a kabbalistic curse that comes around every so often:

“As the saying goes in Israel ‘you have not made it in Israeli politics until you’ve been cursed by the Pulsa DiNura.’”

I will save you a trip down an internet wormhole with this **video**, which shows some fanatics setting the curse upon Ariel Sharon for withdrawing from Gaza. It’s beyond ridiculous. There’s some spooky music, some weird color filtering, and some subtitles to help you understand what’s going on. What I’m not ignorant of is that this contravenes what we all know to be a Jewish principle embedded in the Torah: Never wish harm upon another.



**Geoffrey Dennis** writes:<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Llewellyn Publications 2020

**Pulsa D'nura:** (פּלסא דנורא). “Lashes of Fire.” A divine punishment and curse. The **Talmud** first mentions “lashes of fire” in relation to the **four Sages who entered PaRDeS**, when it relates how the angel **Metatron** was subjected to sixty *pulsei de-nura* for impertinence:

Of him [Elisha ben Abuyah, a mystic turned heretic] Scripture says: Suffer not thy mouth to bring thy flesh into guilt. What does it refer to?—He [Elisha, while on an ecstatic journey through the

heavenly palaces] saw that permission was granted to Metatron to sit and write down the merits of Israel. Said he: It is taught as a tradition that on high there is no sitting and no emulation, and no back, and no weariness. Perhaps—God forbid!—there are two divinities! [Thereupon] they [the angels of discipline] led Metatron forth, and punished him with sixty fiery lashes, saying to him: Why didst thou not rise before him when thou didst see him? (Chag, 15a)

These lashes were a supernal punishment on a spirit. Sefer Zohar has the most information on the lashes. It, too, links the phenomenon to Metatron, for it describes *pulsei de-nura* as a harsh yet generative and protective attribute of the **Shekhinah**:



A single Youth [i.e., Metatron], extending from one end of the world to the other, emerges from between her legs with sixty strokes of fire, decked in colors [the rainbow?]. This one is empowered over those below in Her four directions. [I:223b]

It has been taught: Radiance of those sixty surrounding her [Shekhinah] is etched on the Youth, and we call these “sixty lashes of fire,” in which he is clothed in the aspect of the Shekhinah, blazing judgment, as it is written ... sixty warriors surrounding her. (S of S 3:7) (II:66b–67a)

The lashes also appear on plane of human action, again associated with the Shekhinah:

As for this: The Angel of Elohim [who was going before the camp of Israel] ... on one side she [Shekhinah, the pillar of cloud] was arrayed in crowns of Chesed [love] ... On the second side, she was arrayed in lances of Gevurah [power], in sixty lashes of fire. [ II:51b]

The *pulsa de-nura* is a celestial-angelic force/process/attribute related to Metatron, one that births, protects, and maintains discipline among the supernal denizens. In some readings it seems to be akin to the concept of *yesurim shel ahavah* [divine chastisements of love] and

may even flow down to the human domain in the form of strict justice.

In modern times the *pulsa de-nura* has resurfaced as a title for a **curse**, though the Israeli scholar, Zion Zohar, concludes that a "ritual of *pulsa de-nura*" has no basis in the classical sources, but seems rather to be a borrowed term applied to a modern contrivance.<sup>1</sup>

1. Z. Zohar, "Pulsa De-Nura: The Innovation of Modern Magic and Ritual," *Modern Judaism* 27:1 (2007).

## Kabbalah Curse or Divine Discipline: What is a Pulsa de-Nura?<sup>11</sup>

**Geoff Dennis**, rabbi of Congregation Kol Ami and professor of Kabbalah and Rabbinic Literature in the Jewish Studies Program at the University of North Texas addresses in this post the statute of this rite and its recent creation.<sup>12</sup>

[...] Having done more extensive search than I, The Israeli scholar, **Zion Zohar**, concludes that a "ritual of *pulsa de-nur*" actually has no foundation in the main body of Jewish mysticism. Rather, the curse (s) \* performed against the PM has roots, not in Kabbalah, but in Hebrew magical texts of antiquity, such as *Sefer ha-Razim* [...]

[...] Because of Dr. Zohar's research and other works of de-bunking conducted within the Haredi community itself, it is now understood that the "Lashes of Fire" curse is a modern contrivance dressed up as 'ancient' mystical tradition. [...]

Without pretending to discuss a rather complex topic here, it should be noted only that between the world of *Kabbalah* and that of *Magic* [but even this term would require a long digression] the separation is not and has not been so clear [cf. eg **Idel**, *Ascensions on High in Jewish Mysticism. Pillars, Lines, Ladders*; Elliot R. **Wolfson**, *Language, Eros, Being; Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination*] as some scholars have wished or still wish to imagine. As for the radical reinterpretation of traditions, and the creation of new rites - whether one appreciates it or not - it is part of the dynamics that - for better or for worse - keep the traditions themselves alive ... **Tzvee Zahavy**

<sup>11</sup> <http://ejmmm2007.blogspot.it/2008/03/kabbalah-curse-or-divine-discipline.html>

<sup>12</sup> <http://kammeo.blogspot.com/2013/08/pulsa-de-nura.html>

also dedicates to the subject a post on his blog <http://tzvee.blogspot.it/2006/07/curse-of-pulsa-dnura.html>

*How to Kabbalistically Curse Thy Neighbor with the Pulsa D'Nora. Neighbor Love is not all that religion teaches ...*

other posts. <http://www.canonist.com/?p=79> - <http://www.canonist.com/?p=82> - -  
for *Paleo Judaica* posts <http://paleojudaica.blogspot.it/search?q=pulsa+de-nura>

**Jacobus G. Swart**, *The Book of Self Creation*, 49 s.

<http://www.forward.com/main/article.php?ref=20040923141>

*[...] Apart from the flames of its black candles, then, the only whips of fire that the pulsa de-nura ceremony has are in its talmudic name. Indeed, contrary to the belief that it is a venerably ancient ritual, it is a distinctly modern one, appearing for the first time in Jewish history, according to the Israeli scholar **Meir Bar-Ilan**, in 1905. In that year, Zionist leader and educator **David Yellin** was ritually cursed at a ceremony called pulsa de-nura by anti-Zionist, ultra-Orthodox Jews in Jerusalem, for his role in establishing the city's first secular, Hebrew-speaking schools. [...]*

as for the conclusion of this article [dated September 24, 2004 ]:

Yet to judge by the evidence, the *pulsa de-nura* is none too deadly. Rabin, it is true, was killed soon after the ceremony was performed for him - a victim of the same hatred that inspired it - but **Saddam** is still alive if not particularly well 13 years after being fire-whipped, and David Yellin died at a ripe old age in 1941. **Ariel Sharon**, it would seem, can relax.

we know that - whatever our interpretation - Saddam and Sharon haven't had much time to *relax* - unless you interpret their respective fates rather metaphorically.

On the other hand, to the better fate of David Yellin we can add that of **Teddy Kollek**, as observed by **Jim Davila** [ *PaleoJudaica* ]:

*[...] The success rate of the pulsa de nura curse is not particularly impressive. One was put on Teddy Kollek, former mayor of Jerusalem, and he lived 25+ more years, dying at the age of ninety-five. [...]*

but for a statistical evaluation it would take more complete data ... maybe they are somewhere ... let me know ...! <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/features/the-original-pulsa-denura-1.157720> *The original pulsa denura. **Ultra-Orthodox researchers** say that pulsa denura is not a kabbalistic ceremony, but actually an Israeli Haredi invention - May 4, 2005* summarizes the conclusions of **Dov Schwartz** and **Moshe Blau**

*[...] The two researchers reached the conclusion that the pulsa denura invoked today is merely a new and particularly frightening version of an excommunication edict, a ceremony that also incorporates extinguishing candles, blowing shofars in synagogue and reciting a curse. Excommunication does not really frighten secular Jews. In the final analysis, what do they care if the Haredim ostracize them? After Israel's establishment, the term pulsa denura replaced excommunication.*

The researchers did not identify who gave excommunication its new name. But so as not to hold the reader in suspense, we will note that use of the curse in the early days of the state was usually attributed to religious struggles in Jerusalem that involved the leader of the anti-Zionist Neturei Karta movement, Amram Blau.

*"Pulsa denura is not a kabbalistic ceremony," they concluded. "Kabbalists do not take part in it, it is not done at midnight but rather at midday - not after a fast of three days, not to the light of black candles, the text is not read seven times, and the persons do not necessarily stand facing the east."*

In any event, the writers seemed to have a good time making fun of the secular, who "although they do not believe in the Creator of the World or his Torah, believe - and how - in pulsa denura." [...]

One gets the impression that here in the end there is more light than a true historical interest in the developments of the rite, a diatribe between different currents of Judaism and perhaps also of the *Kabbalistic* world [moreover much more jagged than is often imagined] .

<http://mystical-politics.blogspot.it/2004/09/i-named-this-weblog-mystical-politics.html>

**Rebecca Lesses** - Wednesday, September 15, 2004 [also [mystical-politics / search? Q = pulsa + denura](#) ]

*[...] Before Rabin, the last person so cursed was **Saddam Hussein** . One day during the 1991 Gulf War, as Scuds rained down on Israel, a minyan of fasting kabbalists gathered at the tomb of the prophet Samuel just outside Jerusalem. There they entered a dark cave, where one of the holy men placed a copper tray on a rock and lit the 24 black candles he'd placed on it. As the mystics circled the candles, they chanted the curse seven times, calling on the angels not merely to visit death upon "Saddam the son of Sabha," but to ensure that his wife was given to another man. [...]*  
a reader will add [8:49 PM, July 27, 2005] in a comment

*[...] Today this was in the news [...] Extremists put pulsa denura death curse on PM Ariel Sharon [...]*  
*[...] A group of extreme-right activists said yesterday that they had held a ceremony to place a pulsa denura, a halakhic curse, on Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in order to bring about his death. [...]*  
*[...] The ceremony's organizers also include Rabbi Yosef Dayan from the West Bank*

*settlement of Psagot, who was among the rabbis who had placed a pulsa denura on Rabin. After Rabin's assassination, Dayan was arrested for threatening to place a curse on Shimon Peres [...]*

<https://faculty.biu.ac.il/~barilm/segem.html> [ **Meir Bar-Ilan** , *Segen und Fluch (J)* ]

**Spätestens seit 1905 kennt man ein Fluchritual, worin man einen Menschen verflucht, um ihn zu Tode zu bringen. Der Ritus heißt *pulsa de-nura* ("Feuerstäbe" nach bYom 77a; bHag 15a) und ist nach Meinung der Kabbalisten alt.** Man rezitiert dabei Psalmen, verflucht unter Nennung von Engelsnamen, bläst das Schofar und löscht Kerzen aus. Jerusalemer Charedim verfluchten so 1905 David Jellin, der einige Monate später starb, oder 1957 den Jerusalemer Bürgermeister Gershon Agron (1894-1959), im Golfkrieg (1991) den Herrscher des Irak. In einer ähnlichen Zeremonie wurde 1995 der israelische Ministerpräsident I. Rabin verflucht, der einige Monate später ermordet wurde, und wenig später versammelten sich Tausende Charedim in Jerusalem, um Archäologen zu verfluchen, die Gräber öffnen.

**related topics:**

<http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/books/1998/9812.brook.death.html>

[http://www.acjna.org/acjna/articles\\_detail.aspx?id=117](http://www.acjna.org/acjna/articles_detail.aspx?id=117)

Whatever the story and the prehistory of the *Pulsa de-Nura* and the effectiveness that we want to attribute to it, its use remains extremely interesting, and must be framed in a climate of intolerance and extremism that is also nourished by ancient and new mythologies .

**Abrahamic Forum & Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung** , *Visions of a Just Society. Rear, Hopes and Chnces for Living together in a Globalized World from jewish, Christian, and Myslim Perspectives* (Proceedings European Abrahamic Forum 1), 2006, 46 ff. [ **K. Gebert** , *Washing Bloody Linen in Public*, 44 ff.]

**Angus Muir** - *Destruction & Redemption, The Conduct of Revealed Religious Violence in the Contemporary Era* , Thesis St. Andrews 2001, 154-155

*[...] Beyond the leadership of Raviv, there exists the disparate ideological leadership of the Jewish radical right. The revival during the early 1990s of the 'obsolete' Halakic precepts of din rodef and din moser by certain rabbis can be seen as creating a general climate of rabbinical sanction for violence against Jews. On the eve of Yom Kippur, a few days before Rabin was shot, a group of **Meir Kahane** 's disciples gathered outside the Prime Minister's official residence and chanted an ancient curse known as the *Pulsa da-Nura* . According to Jewish lore if ten rabbis so cursed a man he would die within thirty days. A Jerusalem rabbi, embellished the curse by shouting:*



*"[a] nd on him, Yitzhak son of Rosa, known as Rabin, we have permission to demand from the angels of destruction that they take a sword to this wicked man to kill him for handing over the Land of Israel to our enemies, the sons of Ishmael. "*

Although **Amir** was almost certainly ignorant of the curse, the assassination was to some proof that divine retribution for perceived wrongs could be requested and granted. This particular call for Rabin's death and the judgment that he was *din rodef* was not limited to Israel. In June 1995, **Rabbi Abraham Hecht** of Brooklyn stated that according to Halakah it was allowed to kill Rabin because the policies he was pursuing were endangering Jewish lives. **Although Hecht later retracted his statement** and sent a letter of apology to Rabin, his statement can only be seen as incitement within a Jewish community with loose ties to the Israeli extreme right. The issue of rabbinical sanction was of vital importance to **Amir**. When interviewed by the state investigators following the assassination **Amir stated** :

*"[i] f not for a Halakic ruling of din rodef against Rabin by a few rabbis I knew about, it would have been very difficult for me to murder. Such a murder must be backed up. If I did not get the backing and I had not been representing many more people, I would not have acted. "*

This, however, is not quite the same as having a direct command. Although he told investigators that he had discussed the issue of *din rodef* with several rabbis none had given him unequivocal permission.

*[...] Although it is difficult to prove that specific rabbis , both within Israel and without, actually condemned Rabin (and Peres) to death, the language used by many was unambiguous . In such an environment of Halakic judgment and provocative rhetoric, it now seems obvious that it would only be a matter of time before a religious student, a member of one of Israel's extremist groups, or some other individual drew his own conclusions and decided to act - in much the same vengeful way that Baruch Goldstein [author of a massacre among the unarmed faithful of the Hebron Mosque, with the tragic toll of 29 dead and 125 wounded] acted. Many more examples of rabbinical incitement have followed Rabin's assassination . In January 1996, the Shin Bet arrested an ultra-orthodox Rabbi, Arye Friedman, who had repeatedly stressed the need to kill Shimon Peres at the earliest possible opportunity and "that the only reason he had not assassinated Peres is his obligation to his family. [...]*

**Geoffrey Dennis** writes:<sup>13</sup>

In 1994, in the weeks leading up to the assassination of PM Yitzkhak Rabin, a group of Haredi men gathered publicly and performed a ritual directed against the PM. The news reported that the ceremony was that of the *pulsa de-nura*, "lashes of fire," a curse.

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<sup>13</sup> <http://ejmmm2007.blogspot.com/2008/03/kabbalah-curse-or-divine-discipline.html>

The idea of this supposedly ancient curse captured the public imagination, and I still have people ask me about it. However, trying to pin down the exact nature or provenience of the *pulse de-nura* ritual has proven difficult. That itself should not be surprising given the hundreds of little magical *segulot*, *seferim*, and *kamiyot* (manuals, books, and amulets) in circulation. However, what is striking is how the term actually is used in central Jewish texts - not the way we expect, given what happened in 1994.

The Talmud relates how the angel Metatron was subjected to 60 *pulsei de-nura* for impertinence:

*Of him [Elisha ben Abuya, a mystic turned heretic] Scripture says: Suffer not thy mouth to bring thy flesh into guilt. What does it refer to? – He [Elisha, while on an ecstatic journey through the heavenly palaces] saw that permission was granted to Metatron to sit and write down the merits of Israel. Said he: It is taught as a tradition that on high there is no sitting and no emulation, and no back, and no weariness. Perhaps, – God forbid! – there are two divinities! [Thereupon] they [the angels of discipline] led Metatron forth, and punished him with sixty fiery lashes, saying to him: Why didst thou not rise before him when thou didst see him? (Hagigah 15a)*

Clearly these lashes were a supernal punishment on a spirit, not a curse directed at a human. The Sefer Zohar also links the phenomenon to Metatron, for it describes *pulsei de-nura* as a harsh yet generative and protective attribute of the *Shekhinah*,

*A single Youth ["Youth" = Metatron - see my entry, "Metatron: Anomalous Angel of the Countenance"], extending from one end of the world to the other, emerges from between her legs with sixty strokes of fire, decked in colors [the rainbow, a visible sign of the Shekhinah?]. This one is empowered over those below in Her four directions. [I:223b]*

*It has been taught: Radiance of those sixty surrounding her is etched on the Youth, and we call these 'sixty lashes of fire,' in which he is clothed in the aspect of the Shekhinah, blazing judgment, as it is written, ...**sixty warriors surrounding her** (Song of Songs, 3:7) (Zohar II:66b-67a).*

The one time we see the lashes appear on *Asiyah*, on the plane of human action, is in Zohar II:51b, also associated with the *Shekhinah*:

*As for this: **The Angel of Elohim** [who was going before the camp of Israel]...on one side she [Shekhinah, the pillar of cloud] was arrayed in crowns of *Hesed* [love]...On the second side, she was arrayed in lances of *Gevurah* [power], in sixty lashes of fire...[1]*

So evidently *pulsa de-nura* is a celestial-angelic force/process/attribute related to Metatron, one that births, protects, and maintains discipline among the supernal denizens. In some readings it seems to be akin to the concept of *yesurim shel ahavah* [divine chastisements of love] and may even flow down to the human domain in the form of strict justice - but it is not presented as a curse.

Having done more extensive search than I, The Israeli scholar, Zion Zohar, concludes that a "ritual of *pulsa de-nur*" actually has no foundation in the main body of Jewish mysticism. Rather, the curse(s)\* performed against the PM has roots, not in Kabbalah, but in Hebrew magical texts of antiquity, such as *Sefer ha-Razim* [2]

It may be that because magical texts do not enjoy the same standing in the Jewish community as does Kabbalah, the men who participated in this curse welded their magical efforts to a medieval ritual of *herem* [communal ostracization - but also not a curse] and then put a fig-leaf to their bizarre innovation by telling reporters it was found in *Sefer Zohar* [the Haredi community does not much value the novel, and the secular authorities don't appreciate incitements to violence]. Because of Dr. Zohar's research and other works of de-bunking conducted within the Haredi community itself, it is now understood that the "Lashes of Fire" curse is a modern contrivance dressed up as 'ancient' mystical tradition.

## Bloody Jews?

*In writing about historical outbreaks of Jewish violence, real or imagined, scholars reveal more about themselves than about their subject.*

**Hillel Halkin** writes:<sup>14</sup>

Within the last year (2007), three serious Jewish historians have published books on religiously motivated violence in historical Jewish communities, a subject rarely written about in the past. Can this be a coincidence? Not according to the scholars themselves, since each has explained his interest in the subject in a similar manner.

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/hillel-halkin/bloody-jews/>

The first of these works to appear, *Reckless Rites: Purim and the Legacy of Jewish Violence*, was published last spring by Elliot Horowitz, a professor at Israel's Bar-Ilan University. A study of the manifestation of hostile Jewish feelings toward Gentiles in the carnivalesque atmosphere of the holiday of Purim, *Reckless Rites* was stimulated, Horowitz wrote in his introduction, by Baruch Goldstein's Purim-day murder of 29 Palestinians in the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron in 1994. Although the book was well-researched, its claim of having unearthed a widespread pattern of Jewish religious violence over the centuries was—as I wrote in my review of it in the June 2006 COMMENTARY—greatly exaggerated in terms of the evidence presented.

Next, this past winter, came the Italian-language *Pasque di Sangue* (“Passovers of Blood”) by Ariel Toaff. To the astonishment, if not the horror, of those who read about it in the newspapers, Toaff—also a professor at Bar-Ilan—was alleged to have argued, based on the case of a Christian two-year-old named Simon who was murdered in the city of Trent in northern Italy in 1475, that Jews in medieval Europe did indeed kill Christian children for ritual purposes, just as they had been accused of doing both in the Middle Ages and later. Faced with withering criticism from his fellow historians, Toaff subsequently withdrew the book from circulation and denied having written in it that such killings actually took place. What he had wanted to do, he told the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*, was “to deal with *verbal* religious violence, which can lead to destructive consequences” (emphasis added). All around him, the paper reported him as saying, he had seen

*extremist Jewish elements that are distorting the spirit of Judaism, with curses and attempts at excommunication, and this, in his opinion, could end badly. As, for example, in the cases of the pulsa denura (kabbalistic death-curse) ceremonies that were the background to the [1995] assassination of Yitzhak Rabin by Yigal Amir.*

Finally, we have *A Murder in Lemberg: Politics, Religion, and Violence in Modern Jewish History*,\* a newly published work by Michael Stanislawski of Columbia University. This is an investigation of the 1848 poisoning by Orthodox Jews of Rabbi Abraham Kohn in Lemberg (the city known in Polish as Lwow and in Ukrainian as Lviv) in Galicia, the Austrian-ruled region of southern Poland. “The assassination of Yitzhak Rabin on 4 November 1995,” Stanislawski writes in his preface to the book,

*sent shockwaves through the world. . . . A Jew had killed the prime minister of Israel! How could this have happened? How could the religious and political divides within Israel have descended to this low? How could a Jew kill another Jew for political and religious reasons? . . . The Rabin assassination only gave me added incentive to study in depth an earlier, almost unknown, case of an internal Jewish assassination that had intrigued me for years.*

In short, Horowitz, Toaff, and Stanislawski all attest to having been spurred in their research by contemporary events and, specifically, the resort to violence by Jewish religious nationalists and settler groups in Israel. All three—two teaching at the same Orthodox-sponsored university in Israel at which Yigal Amir was a student—profess to be shocked by this. All seek its roots. And all come to the conclusion that these roots lie buried deep in the Jewish past, relegated to a collective Jewish unconscious from which we are now witnessing, as it were, the deadly return of the repressed.

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“Almost unknown” as a description of the Kohn murder case is a bit of an overstatement. Nearly a century ago this murder was discussed by the renowned Jewish historian Simon Dubnow in his multi-volume *History of the Jewish People*, and others have dealt with it since. Yet it is certainly true that it has never before been considered more than a minor episode,



and Michael Stanislawski, with the help of recently opened Ukrainian state archives, is the first to investigate it in depth. Let us take a look at what he has found.

Abraham Kohn was born in 1807 in a small town in Bohemia, today part of the Czech Republic; had a traditional Jewish upbringing; studied philosophy and rabbinics in Prague; and received an Orthodox ordination from the chief rabbi of that city in 1832. His first pulpit was in the small town of Hohenems in the Austrian Tyrol, where he officiated for the next eleven years. While he made no attempt to introduce non-Orthodox practices into the religious life of the Hohenems community, his sermons and writings from this period, unearthed and analyzed by Stanislawski, were highly critical of what he considered to be Orthodoxy's exclusive emphasis on ritual observance at the expense of moral principle and conduct. In this respect, Kohn was intellectually close to the leaders of the new German Reform movement. When a group of prominent Lemberg Jews founded a Reform-style temple that opened its doors in 1843, he accepted their invitation to be its rabbi.

Although mid-19th-century Lemberg was situated in a region of Eastern Europe inhabited by Poles, Ukrainians, and largely hasidic Jews, it was, as the Austrian administrative capital of Galicia, a partially Germanized city. Besides its many Austrian bureaucrats, businessmen, and professionals, it had a Jewish community whose modernizing elements identified with German culture and with the German-Jewish Haskalah or "Hebrew Enlightenment." It was these modernizers, or "progressives" as Stanislawski calls them, who invited Kohn to head the new synagogue.

He did so with great success. Not only was he a gifted preacher who called both for internal religious reforms and for full civic equality for Galicia's unemancipated Jews, including abolition of the special government taxes imposed on them. He was also an ambitious educator, under whose direction the temple's school, which conducted its classes in German

and taught secular subjects alongside Jewish ones, quickly reached an enrollment of over 700 children—an impressive figure in a Jewish community of some 20,000.

Nevertheless, the great majority of Lemberg's Jews did not belong to Kohn's congregation or send their children to its school, and some were fiercely hostile to it. In dividing the city's Jewish community into a number of different social and religious categories, Stanislawski places two of these in the hostile camp. One, he writes, was composed of

*the extreme traditionalists . . . who opposed both Hasidism and the Haskalah, and were prepared to use all means at their disposal to extirpate these groups from Lemberg Jewry. This group included the richest Jews in the city, who made their fortunes through the collection of the special kosher-slaughtering and candle taxes incumbent on the Jews, which also depended on control over the official registers of the Jewish population, the so-called metrical books. These men, not surprisingly, therefore steadfastly opposed any changes to the traditional mode of record-keeping and tax collecting in the Jewish community.*

The second center of opposition to Kohn was formed by Lemberg's Hasidim. Hasidism, which had originated in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century as a movement of popular pietism in nearby southwestern Ukraine, had by Kohn's day made great inroads in Galicia, especially among the Jewish lower classes. Its followers, Stanislawski writes,

*opposed the rabbinic establishment of both [the traditionalist and the modernizing] Lemberg Jewish communities, and often denounced them to the Austrian authorities, especially charging unfairness in the assessment and collection of the taxes incumbent on the Jews.*

Kohn was thus disliked by a significant portion of Lemberg's Jews for both religious and economic reasons. As a modernizer, he was viewed as a threat to traditional Jewish life; as a campaigner for Jewish political emancipation, he jeopardized the financial interests of the Orthodox sector's upper class. And the dangers he represented grew greater when, in 1847, he was appointed by the Austrian authorities to be *Kreisrabbiner* or chief rabbi of the Lemberg district, a position that gave him a wide range of powers. As antagonism toward him grew, so did the pressures on him to resign: money was offered to get him to leave, threats were made on his life, and on one occasion he was attacked and beaten.

None of this lessened Kohn's determination to remain at his post. Finally, in September 1848, in the midst of that year's revolutionary ferment, which spread to Galicia from the rest of the Austro-Hungarian empire and in which Kohn was politically active in the liberal ranks, a hasidic Jew named Abraham Ber Pilpel entered the Kohn family's apartment, asked the cook for permission to light his cigar from the flame on the kitchen stove, and poured arsenic into a pot of soup. All of the Kohns were poisoned. Abraham Kohn and an infant daughter died; his wife and four other children survived.

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A large part of *A Murder in Lemberg* is spent tracing the Austrian authorities' investigation and prosecution of the Kohn murder case, which ended in a travesty of justice with Pilpel's acquittal by an appellate court. This verdict, Stanislawski argues, was connected to the ultimate collapse of the 1848 uprising in Galicia and to the resurgence in Vienna of reactionary forces that backed the anti-progressives in Lemberg's Jewish community. One of Stanislawski's two main conclusions, indeed, is that

*the Kohn assassination reveals a fundamental aspect of modern Jewish history that has heretofore remained all but unstudied: the alliance in many times and places between*

*Orthodox (and other forms of traditionalist) Jewry and conservative and even reactionary political forces and states—even in unexpected places like late-Czarist Russia, where we have just begun to understand the growing coalition that emerged between the government and the leadership of Orthodox Judaism. More well-known is the [20th-century] alliance between the Agudath Israel party and the increasingly anti-Semitic government of late-interwar Poland, and we are just now beginning to have studies on such alliances in contemporary Israel and even, most recently, in the United States as well.*

Stanislawski's second generalization has to do with the murder itself. Although there were cases before Kohn's of Jews in Eastern Europe being killed by other Jews in a communal context, this was almost always for informing on Jews to the government, as when two men were murdered in Russia in 1840 for disclosing the names of Jews evading military service. "So far as we know," writes Stanislawski,

*no Jewish community in medieval or early modern Europe ever ordered a heretic killed, as opposed to excommunicated, on the basis of his or her beliefs. . . . The assassination of Rabbi Abraham Kohn was a radical turning in Jewish history because, for the first, but alas not the last, time we encounter the murder of a Jewish leader by another Jew on the basis of political-cum-religious motivations.*

Thus, in the case of the Rabin assassination, Stanislawski continues,

*Although the vast majority of Orthodox Jews in Israel and abroad abhorred [Yigal] Amir's actions, he and his supporters (almost exclusively from extreme right-wing groups in Israel that combine religious Orthodoxy and absolute opposition to the peace process) continue to insist that he was working in the name of the Lord. And, all too tragically, the debate about the extent to which Jewish law permits or prohibits such murders continues to this day (these*

*words are being written [in 2005] in the immediate aftermath of the withdrawal of Israeli settlers and armed forces from Gaza).*

And so, from the murder of Abraham Kohn to the Rabin assassination, and from there to settler lawlessness aimed at the Palestinians and the “peace process,” the line of intra-Jewish political violence, Stanislawski thinks, runs straight and clear. The Kohn murder case—a distinctly modern phenomenon that could not have taken place before the age of the Haskalah, when “progressive” Jews first challenged the Orthodox monopoly on Jewish religious life, leading to a new kind of politicized fundamentalism in reaction—was an early harbinger of far worse things to come.

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But was it really? One may be permitted to be skeptical. The Kohn murder was a local and quickly forgotten incident that never served as a precedent for later events. And as for the extremist rabbis who in 1995 gave their blessing to the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, they did so, contrary to Stanislawski’s assertion, precisely on the basis of rabbinic laws regarding the “case of the informer” (*din moser*) and the “case of the menace to Jewish life” (*din rodef*). The issue, as far as these rabbis and their followers were concerned, was Rabin’s policies, not his beliefs, which in themselves would never have endangered him.

But neither, for that matter, would mere beliefs have endangered Abraham Kohn. To claim that he was killed for his opinions rather than for the changes he sought to bring about in Galician Jewish life by political means is to fly in the face of everything that Stanislawski himself tells us. Moreover, in depicting the traditionalist camp in Galicia as consistently benighted, avaricious, and aggressive, and the “progressives” as high-minded, idealistic, and



defending themselves from attack, Stanislawski paints a highly one-sided picture. The truth was far more complex.

Jewish Galicia, in the first half of the 19th century, was a battleground between two main forces: the Haskalah, which came from the West and attracted a strong following in the Jewish intelligentsia and bourgeoisie, and Hasidism, which arrived from the East and quickly established itself among the poorer classes. It goes without saying that the Hasidim, who were even more fiercely opposed to modernization and secular education than were anti-hasidic Orthodox Jews, viewed the Haskalah as a mortal enemy. Yet the opposite was no less true. In the eyes of Galicia's Jewish modernizers, Hasidism was a blight that had to be fought tooth-and-nail. Besides keeping the impoverished masses of Galician Jewry in a state of cultural and economic backwardness while thwarting their participation in general society, Hasidism, as the "progressives" saw it, threatened to tar all Jews, themselves included, with the brush of belonging to a separatist minority to whom it was pointless to grant equal rights because it did not wish to be and could not be integrated into the life around it.

Throughout the early 19th century, therefore, the modernizers, as represented by intellectuals, educators, and pro-Haskalah Jews like Herz Homberg, Joseph Perl, Judah Leib Mieses, Solomon (not "Samuel," as Stanislawski refers to him) Judah Rappoport, and others, used their influence to persuade the Austrian government to adopt a series of draconian measures that were meant to curtail the hasidic movement and ultimately quash it. These measures, largely ignored by Stanislawski, included banning the publication and circulation of hasidic books; outlawing hasidic prayer groups; restricting the movement and residence rights of hasidic rabbis; requiring the Hasidim, who were monolingual Yiddish speakers, to demonstrate a proficiency in German in order to obtain marriage licenses and other things; and so on and so forth. Also placed on the books but never enforced were laws forbidding hasidic dress and prohibiting the use of Yiddish for religious education. Nor did the

modernizers shrink from the widespread use of informers to monitor the Hasidim and report on their infractions.

Indeed, although Stanislawski speaks of an “alliance” in Galicia between Jewish traditionalism and Austrian absolutism, there was, in the battle against Hasidism, at least as much collusion between the government and the Jewish “progressives.” As the noted historian Raphael Mahler observes in his book *Hasidism and Haskalah*:

*In their unconditional submission to the absolutist monarchy, all [the modernizers] were in agreement. . . . Unlike the anti-hasidic traditionalists [who also supported the monarchy], the modernizers had a clear political ideology that viewed [a benevolent] absolutism as the ideal form of social and political rule.*

The politics of Abraham Kohn, who appeared on the scene a decade or two after the period referred to by Mahler, were different. And yet Kohn, too, was quite ready to enlist the power of an autocratic Austrian government to further his “progressive” ends. One of his first acts upon being appointed to the position of *Kreisrabbiner*, indeed, was to demand that the government enforce the long-disregarded ban on traditional hasidic clothing.

While Stanislawski acknowledges that “this recommendation, coming from another Jew, was undoubtedly shocking to contemporary traditional Jews,” he fails to comment on what it tells us about the potentially Jacobin nature of Kohn’s and others’ “progressivism,” or on how justified was the traditionalists’ fear of Kohn’s role as *Kreisrabbiner*. Take, for example, the question of the “metrical books.” Stanislawski attributes the opposition to Kohn’s gaining control of these population registries solely to the traditionalists’ fear of losing tax income. And yet aside from disclosing who was taxable, the registries revealed who was eligible for military service. Since being a conscript in the Austrian army, in addition to its other physical and psychological hardships for previously cloistered observant Jews, required them to eat

non-kosher food and violate the Sabbath and other sacred principles of Judaism, it is no wonder that the Orthodox were desperate to evade it and often avoided recording male births.

Knowing that Kohn, like other Jewish modernizers, was scrupulously opposed to such chicanery and expected Jews to fulfill their civic obligations, the Orthodox had good reason to believe that putting the Lemberg-district records in his hands would mean compelling young Jews to abandon their faith. This in itself would have sufficed to classify him as an informer who was legitimately subject to the death penalty in halakhic terms.

The battle between modernization and Orthodoxy in Galicia, soon to spill over into the rest of Eastern Europe, may have been one between light and darkness, but Stanislawski tends to forget that light can also ravage while darkness can nourish and protect. Although the Galician modernizers fought for some worthy goals, the forces of tradition standing in their way, particularly Hasidism, had, in addition to their superstition and simony, positive features that Haskalah thought and German-style Reform lacked: religious passion, emotional vitality, communal solidarity, a deep sympathy for the poor and for the working-class Jew, a refusal to kowtow to the Gentile world. While Reform was serving the Jews of Germany and Central Europe as a transit point to full assimilation, Orthodoxy and Hasidism were everywhere keeping alive a powerful sense of Jewish peoplehood. Had they not done so, Zionism, when it arrived on the scene a half-century later, would have had no popular base—even young socialist and anti-religious Zionists came largely from Orthodox homes, and the hasidic influence on their devotion to the Zionist cause was great—and there would be no state of Israel today.

Indeed, although it is Stanislawski's stated aim in *A Murder in Lemberg* to illuminate the Jewish present by means of the Jewish past, he has actually done the opposite: he has chosen to understand the traditionalist-modernist conflict in 19th-century Galicia in terms of his own identification as a "progressive" Jew aligned with the Israeli "peace camp." Just as he views

the clash between Left and Right in Israel as a simple matter of right and wrong, so he regards the Galician *Kulturkampf* as having been black-and-white. Ironically, though he, like Horowitz and Toaff, is critical of apologetic Jewish historians for sweeping under the rug some of the less attractive features of traditional Orthodoxy, his own apology for Abraham Kohn's brand of 19th-century Jewish liberalism is no less a whitewash.

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Stanislawski's thesis notwithstanding, the question of who killed Abraham Kohn is hardly of general interest today. The same cannot be said for the murder of two-year-old Simon of Trent. Of all the repeated accusations made against Jews over the centuries, none has been more horrendous than the blood libel—the belief, first appearing in the English town of Norwich in 1144, that Jews regularly murdered Gentile children, sometimes crucifying them in imitation of the crucifixion of Jesus and extracting their blood for the baking of matzah on Passover. Apart from the charge of murdering the son of God, to which the blood libel is thematically related, nothing has more inflamed anti-Semitic passions through the ages or contributed more to the anti-Semitic image of the Jew as an inhumanly satanic creature.

Nor has any anti-Semitic accusation continued more persistently into modern times, leading to the notorious Mendel Beilis trial in Russia in 1911 and criminal proceedings in Nazi Germany in the 1930's, and still resonating in today's Arab and Muslim worlds—and all this despite the fact that no other charge has been more repeatedly refuted. Indeed, all medieval and modern historians have long considered the blood libel to have been a total calumny, propagated by psychological hysteria and religious and socio-economic motives. The Catholic Church, too, although it endorsed a number of blood libels in the Middle Ages and beatified some of their alleged victims, Simon of Trent among them, has—however tardily—admitted their speciousness. Simon's status as a religious martyr was withdrawn in 1965 as part of Pope Paul VI's *Nostra Aetate* proclamation at the Second Vatican Council.

And so, when Ariel Toaff, a scholar of medieval and Renaissance history, and the Italian-born son of Rome's chief rabbi Elio Toaff, published his *Pasque di Sangue* in early February, it made instant headlines. Abetting the publicity was a review by the Italian Jewish historian Sergio Luzatto, who praised it in Italy's prestigious *Corriere della Sera* as a "magnificent book of history." Toaff, wrote Luzatto, had established that

*from 1100 to about 1500 . . . several crucifixions of Christian children really happened, bringing about retaliations against entire Jewish communities—punitive massacres of men, women, children. Neither in Trent in 1475 nor in other areas of Europe in the late Middle Ages were Jews always innocent victims.*

Yet Luzatto's review proved to be the only one written by a serious academic in Toaff's defense. Other Italian historians, including Diego Quaglioni of the University of Trent and Anna Foa of the University of Rome, published blistering attacks on *Pasque di Sangue*, faulting it for sensationalism and sloppy methodology, especially in taking at face value the testimony given under torture by the sixteen Jews tried and convicted of killing Simon and preparing unleavened bread with his blood. Furious protests followed from many quarters. The Jewish world professed outrage; colleagues of Toaff at Bar-Ilan demanded his dismissal; and his own father all but disowned him.

In response, though first declaring that he would stand by his book "even if crucified," Toaff proceeded to beat a hasty retreat, declaring that he had been misunderstood and ordering his publisher not to reprint *Pasque di Sangue* after its first edition of 1,000 copies had sold out in a single day. When I sought to obtain the book in late February, I was told it would cost 300 euros, and in the end I had to make do with a pirated text.



Even before considering *Pasque di Sangue* itself, there is much that is puzzling about Toaff's behavior in regard to it. How could an Israeli historian not have anticipated the intensity of the reaction to such a book? And if he did anticipate it, why did he back down so quickly when it occurred? Moreover, if he believed he had been misunderstood, why did he not keep the book in print and let it speak for itself rather than withdraw it from circulation? And if, as he has said, he intended it as a purely scholarly work and had no interest in publicity, why did he write it in so popular a style?

This style, clearly meant for a general audience, is the first thing to strike one about *Pasque di Sangue*, which begins with a scene-setting description of the grand entrance into Venice in 1469 of the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick III. The entire first chapter of the book is devoted to sketching the background against which the Trent trial took place—a sketch that, although no scholar would have need of it, introduces the lay reader to the Jewish community of northern Italy from which the trial's accused came.

This was a community that was Ashkenazi and Yiddish-speaking, composed of relatively recent immigrants from the Germanic lands beyond the Alps, and throughout *Pasque di Sangue*, Toaff contrasts it with the “real” Italian Jews to the south of the Po River who had lived in the country for centuries or more and were well-integrated. Unlike the southerners, the Ashkenazim of the north, who had a long history of Christian persecution going back to the massacres of the First Crusade, were, in Toaff's description, insular, conspiratorial, hostile toward Gentiles, highly competitive in their business practices (many engaged in banking and money-lending), and extreme in their religious beliefs.

The dichotomy between the relaxed, at-home-in-the-world Italian Jew and the rigid, xenophobic northerner is central to Toaff's book. While it may reflect certain realities of the period, it also impresses one as a projection back into time of Ashkenazi-Sephardi tensions in the Israel of recent decades, with all the stereotypes engendered by those tensions. (Although

Italian Jewry was never, strictly speaking, “Sephardi,” it was closer in its rituals and liturgy to the Jewish communities of the Mediterranean than to those of the European interior.) Toaff’s “real” Italian Jews are the “good Jews” of his story as opposed to the “bad Jews” from beyond the Alps, with their “aggressive economic entrepreneurship” and “lack of respect for the laws of the country.” Jews south of the Po, *Pasque di Sangue* repeatedly stresses, never suffered from the blood libel that was repeatedly hurled against the Jews of German-speaking lands, and they had none of the fascination with suffering, martyrdom, and blood that runs through the religious culture of late-medieval German Jewry.

This fascination, rather than the Trent trial itself, is the main focus of *Pasque di Sangue*, and Toaff does a thorough job of documenting it. Citing liturgical texts, rabbinic homilies, memoirs, and iconographic evidence, he makes a good case for the argument that, shaped by bitter experience, Ashkenazi Jewry at the time of the trial, as in the generations that preceded it, believed that blood shed for the faith had a redemptive value in God’s eyes. Salvational and purifying, it was closely linked in the Ashkenazi religious imagination with such traditions and rituals as the biblical binding of Isaac, the sacrifice of the paschal lamb and the painting of Israelite doorposts with its blood at the time of the Exodus, animal sacrifice in the Temple, and the blood of the circumcision ceremony.

Moreover, Toaff demonstrates that human blood—taken from living donors, dried and powdered, and trafficked-in commercially—was widely considered in the age of the Trent trial, by both Gentiles and Jews, to have medicinal and magical properties, the blood of children being especially valued for its rejuvenating powers. Sometimes used homeopathically to stanch the bleeding after a circumcision, such powders were countenanced by some rabbis—despite the strict biblical prohibition on the consumption of blood—on the grounds that they had been transformed into a different substance.

So much for the Trent trial's background. From here on, Toaff's reasoning runs as follows: since we know that the Ashkenazi Jews of northern Italy harbored hatred and disdain for Gentiles and felt unconstrained by the law of the land; since we know, too, that they were obsessed with blood and considered its use to be religiously and medically efficacious; since the imagery of blood plays an important role in the story of Passover, where it also appears in the plague of blood in Egypt and in the verse from Ezekiel in the Haggadah, "In thy blood thou shalt live, in thy blood thou shalt live"; since in Trent and at other blood-libel trials, Jews confessed to having murdered Christian children so as to use their blood on Passover; and since these confessions included accurate details of Jewish prayers and ceremonies that the defendants' interrogators could not have invented, why automatically consider them false just because they were made under physical duress? Why not admit the likelihood that at least some of them could have been true?

Toaff is right when he insists that *Pasque di Sangue* nowhere states in so many words that the confessions given at the Trent trial are reliable. What his book does do, again and again, is *give the impression* that they are reliable. It has several ways of conveying this impression, the most common being the use of conditional verbs to treat the hypothetical as though it were the probable. Thus, to take a typical example, after citing one of the Trent confessions, Toaff begins a new paragraph with the sentences: "The crucifixion of Simon would have been carried out [*sarebbe stata effettuata*] on a bench in the women's section of the synagogue. . . . The body of the child, still alive, would then have been transferred [*sarebbe stato poi trasferito*] by beadles to the central hall of the synagogue and laid on the cantor's podium," and so forth. The clear implication is that most likely this is what actually happened.

Elsewhere, "evidence" given under torture is made to seem credible by Toaff's insertion of seemingly innocent qualifiers. Frequently he makes statements like, "The use of the blood of small Christian children in the celebration of Passover was *apparently* the object of a normative minority [of Ashkenazi Jews], *at least to judge by* the depositions of the defendants

at the Trent trial” (emphases added). In other places, he dons the mantle of a judicious neutrality, observing that there is no way of determining whether the confessions were true or not, or ironically suggesting that it would be naïve to dismiss them out of hand, as when he writes: “Whether we are talking about [no more than] a fairytale worthy of the Grimm brothers, meant to terrorize little children and keep them awake at night, we cannot know [*non sappiamo*].”

Nowhere, moreover, does Toaff seriously contend with the powerful arguments against accepting the reliability of the Trent confessions, or of the confessions made at similar trials. He never acknowledges the overwhelming body of forensic evidence that tortured individuals will confess to anything; never asks why, if the Jewish murder of Christian children in the Middle Ages and afterward was so common, there is absolutely no hint of it in Jewish sources, in which we would expect to find at least some rabbis condemning it, if only in cryptic language to avoid Christian investigation; never notes that, if Ashkenazi Jews were obsessed with blood and sacrifice in the late Middle Ages, they were far less so than was most of Christian Europe, where worship of a man-god crucified by Jews, his transubstantiated blood consumed in the communion ceremony, became a veritable cult of suffering and sado-masochistic fantasy; never seriously inquires into the ways in which such fantasies might have led to accusations of Jewish child murder; never weighs the likelihood that most or all of the murdered children were the victims of local pedophiles, who in some cases may themselves have started the rumor that Jews were responsible; never dwells more than perfunctorily on the fact that, besides losing their lives, the Jews condemned at blood-libel trials had all their wealth confiscated by the authorities, who thus had a strong motive for accusing them falsely.

And so, long after the Christian world has exonerated the Jews of the blood libel, Toaff disregards practically every reason for the exoneration. His claim to have been misunderstood is, quite simply, dishonest. It adds cowardice to his other faults, as does his withdrawal

of *Pasque di Sangue* from circulation after first swearing to defend it, “even”—a revealing association in the context of blood libels!—“if crucified.”

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*Pasque di Sangue* is in fact an impossible book to defend. And yet the damage done by it is already great and will increase with time. Toaff has given anti-Semites and enemies of Israel a gift they could never have dreamed of: a work by a reputable Jewish scholar, the son of a leading rabbi, “proving” that the most hideous of all anti-Semitic charges is true. From now on, whoever believes in Jewish vampirism, whether literally or figuratively, as in the notorious caricature in Britain’s *Independent* of Ariel Sharon as an ogre eating a Palestinian child, need only cite *Pasque di Sangue* as his reference. Even if Toaff were to destroy every copy of it, pirated editions, translated into various languages, will no doubt soon be turning up beside *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Indeed, Toaff’s attempted suppression of it will only be taken as proof of the Elders’ power. No sooner has the truth about Jewish child murder been revealed than it is banished by them from the bookstores!

*Pasque di Sangue* is thus a harmful and irresponsible book in a way that neither Horowitz’s *Reckless Rites* nor Stanislawski’s *A Murder in Lemberg* can be said to be. Nor are all three about the same thing, for whereas the first two purport to uncover historic patterns of systemic Jewish violence toward Gentiles, the third deals with the murder of a single Jew.

And yet all three of these books share, to one degree or another, the same tendency. In each a knowledgeable Jewish scholar, reacting to the extremes of religious nationalism in Israel, distorts the past in an attempt to understand a present that alarms him. “How could this have happened?” asks Stanislawski of the Rabin assassination with a palpable sense of shock. In reply, he points to Abraham Ber Pilpel as Yigal Amir’s forerunner, just as Horowitz links



Baruch Goldstein to vengeful Purim Jews, and Toaff views northern Italy's barbaric Ashkenazim as the predecessors of today's settlers.

Stanislawski's question, however, is an odd one for a historian to ask. Why, after all, should it not have happened? Why should a Jew in Israel not be capable of assassinating a prime minister believed by him to be leading his country to disaster? Has not practically every nation on earth, including those we think of today as the most civilized, had its extreme religious and political movements, its civil wars and assassinations, its bloody conflicts with its neighbors, often in recent historical times? What is there to make a historian think that Jews should be immune to such things or so to shock him when they appear in a Jewish state as to affect his judgment of what happened hundreds of years ago?

Accompanying this shock, I think, is a kind of dialectical reasoning. It starts with the belief that the Jews, at least since outgrowing their ancient warrior spirit, have indeed been historically more civilized, more rational, and more "progressive" than other peoples. Next, it turns its attention to the state of Israel in which, by contemporary liberal standards, many Jews seem distressingly unlike this image of them. How, the question is asked, can a Jewish state that oppresses Palestinians and is in thrall to a territorially expansionist settler movement driven by a fanatical religious nationalism have emerged from a past guided by such different values?

The problem, then, is to reconcile these seemingly opposed aspects of Jewish experience. One way of doing so would be to acknowledge that Jewish values in the past have never been quite what they are now taken to be, and that the belief in a historically "progressive" Jewish people is largely an illusion of the modern liberal Jewish imagination. A close scrutiny of Jewish history would provide ample basis for such a conclusion.

Yet, for some Jewish historians, their own sense of Jewishness has been too shaped by that imagination for them to accept this possibility. A different solution must be found.

It is this solution, it seems to me, that Horowitz, Stanislawski, and Toaff, each in his different way, have hit upon. It is the solution of what one might call the “hidden gene.” The Jews, we are told, have indeed been, ever since reaching national maturity, a “progressive” people. Yet within the body of this people there has always been a defective element, a genetic throwback, as it were. This element has surfaced at different times in Jewish history in different guises and has been repressed each time in an act of collective denial. But that denial has come at the Jewish people’s peril, since the “hidden gene” continues to reside recessively within it, always with the potential to crop up again, as in Israel’s settler movement—which, precisely because its antecedents were forgotten, was slow to be recognized and combated. It is thus incumbent on the Jewish historian to search for these antecedents and to expose them, for both explanatory and prophylactic ends.

This, however, is poor history and poor politics. It is a Manichean approach to both, according to which there is a “good” Jewish people and a “bad” Jewish people, or a “good” and “bad” Jew within every Jew, so that, in order to maintain the balance between them, the better the “good” Jew is (the “real” Italian Jew south of the Po, the modernizer in Lemberg, the Israeli supporter of the “peace process”), the worse the “bad” Jew must be made to seem. And yet just as this does not yield an accurate picture of 19th-century Galicia or 15th-century Italy, so it does not yield one of Israel today.

What is ultimately lacking in such historians is the kind of Jewish self-acceptance that would enable them to feel comfortable with the totality of Jewish experience rather than with just those parts of it that they identify with. This is not a matter of liking everything. It is one of understanding and having empathy for everything—the ability, so crucial in the writing of history, to get under the skin even of what one disapproves of and to fathom its inner world.

Neither Horowitz, Stanislawski, nor Toaff is able to do this with historical Jewish populations they perceive negatively, just as they seem unable to do it with religious nationalism in Israel today. If they could, they would realize that, no less than the Orthodox and the modernizers in 19th-century Galicia, the Israeli religious Right and the Israeli secular Left are as much profoundly complementary as they are bitterly opposed. It would take a historian more inclusive in his sympathies to grasp this: one more aware of the deeper dialectic of Jewish history.