Volume 10: Jews and Violence in the Early Modern Period

Jodocus Damhouder, *Praxis Rerum Criminalium*, 1562, p. 167

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Volume 10: Jews and Violence in the Early Modern Period, University of Maryland, College Park, MD, August, 18-20, 2013

Keynote Robert Davis, Ohio State University. "Typologies of Violence in Early-Modern Europe"

1  Adam Teller, Brown University. "Killed or Be Killed. Realities and Representations of Violence in Seventeenth-century Ukraine"

57  Samuel Cohn, University of Glasgow. "Plague and Violence against Jews in Early Modern Europe"


90  Serena di Nepi, Sapienza Università di Roma. "Rome, 1571: A Body and a Murder Investigation in the Ghetto"

112  Daniel Strum, Universidade de São Paulo. "La Mala Sangre: daily violence within the Western Sephardic Diaspora"

145  Jerzy Mazur, Université de Nantes. "[Jewish Violence in Polish Laws and Courts]"

163  Elisheva Carlebach, Columbia University. "Big Blows on a Small Stage: Records of Violence in Jewish communal registers, Altona 1765-1776"

182  Yair Mintzker, Princeton University. "A Jewish Perspective on the Execution of 'Jew Süß': 4 February 1738."

192  Noa Sophie Kohler, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev. "The murder of a travel companion. Violence, gender and living conditions of servants in 18th century Prussia"

200  Yohanan Petrovsky-Stern, Northwestern University. "Exorcism and Violence: Contexts Internal and External."

208  Francesca Bregoli, Queens College of the City University of New York, "Violence at a Purim Ball"
Violence and Physical Strength in the Vernacular Legend of the Red Jews

Rebekka Voß, Goethe University, Frankfurt, Germany

Introduction

Violence is often linked to power and physical strength. Violence is typically associated with ruling authorities and the realm of the majority, rather than in the hands of an oppressed minority, as in case of Diaspora Jewry, which has been identified with victimhood. Moreover, in historiography, the perception of Jews as targets of aggression perpetrated by “the other,” whether Christian or Muslim, corresponds to the widely held idea that Jewish men differ from their non-Jewish peers. The prototype of the “unmanly Jew,” even labeled as “effeminate” Jewish man – i.e., gentle, non-violent, valuing words over actions – runs deep in European and Jewish cultural history as a counter-image to the gentile ideal of muscular and forceful masculinity and takes on various shapes, with negative as well as positive connotations.

The vernacular legend of the Red Jews allows us to explore the relationship of violence, physical strength and power during the early modern period, extending the traditional treatment of Jews and violence in that era. The term “Red Jews,” a unique vernacular characterization of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel, was in circulation among Jews and Christians in German- and Yiddish-speaking regions in the late Middle Ages and early modern period. The Red Jews were fabled to live beyond the mysterious Sambatyon River, where they would reside until the time comes for them to assist the Messiah – i.e., the Antichrist in Christian lore – taking revenge for centuries of anti-Jewish oppression by bringing apocalyptic destruction to Christianity at the end of days. This legend was immensely popular among both Jews and Christians and appears in many versions in a range of genres, in both manuscript and print.
One of its German variants is included in *Der Göttweiger Trojaner Krieg* (The Göttweig Trojan War; Text 1), a Middle High German verse romance that originated in northern Switzerland circa 1270-1300. It presents narrative material relating to the Trojan War of Greek antiquity with a burlesque twist, entwined with motifs from the Arthurian romance. Here, during their battles against Troy, the Greeks encounter the horrible Red Jews. Whereas the German account depicts these terrifying Jews as huge and robust, equipped with military skill that is linked to aggressive and violent might, the Yiddish *Ma’ase Akdamut* (Story of Akdamut; Text 2) presents a more complex picture. The version presented here – the oldest known and most popular of the early modern Yiddish versions of the Red Jews' story, transmitted in a Yiddish manuscript of edifying historical and narrative texts (c. 1580-1600) preserved in the Bodleian Library, Oxford – conveys a tension between the well-established notion that violence can only be exercised by those who wield conventional strength and power and a Jewish revenge fantasy whose unlikely hero is a little, frail and elderly Red Jew who walks with a limp. While his physical abilities may be limited, this Red Jew triumphs in the end by means of a source of power that is less readily visible, namely magic that uses the divine names.

Select Bibliography

On *The Göttweig Trojan War*:


Elisabeth Lienert, *Deutsche Antikenromane des Mittelalters* (Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 2001), 140-145.

On the Red Jews:


On Jewish masculinity:


Violence and Physical Strength in the Vernacular Legend of the Red Jews

Rebekka Voß, Goethe University, Frankfurt, Germany

*The Göttweig Trojan War* (1270-1300)

Translated by R. Voß. I thank Regina Toepfer for her generous help with the Middle High German.

[...]

These fine [Greek] warriors, the very best entered another land, [whose inhabitants] were called Plotzen.¹ This was the land of Red Jewry, which is still spoken of in many lands today. They were a poisonous lot indeed. From travellers they demanded a very heavy toll, [so] it is said. Their country stretched far and wide --- line missing ---. Virtue and modesty they all lacked. As a rule they were huge and horrible, and so thoroughly foul that anyone who encountered them was frightened for his life.

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¹ Koppitz reads “Colchis,” an ancient kingdom in today's western Georgia. This conforms to the well established association of the land of the Red Jews with the Caucasus region. Another speculative reading, for which I am indebted to Regina Toepfer, could be “fat and strong men” or “fatsos,” cf. Ernst Christmann and Julius Krämer, Pfälzisches Wörterbuch (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1965-1998), vol. 1:1028, s.v. *Plotzer*.
Ulysses the faint-hearted was seen bewailing his misery, but He who had often saved him, provided estimable solace. It had to be and must come to pass: the noble knights, the best there were, armed themselves for battle; but they certainly had never before been in such distress. Right up to their grim deaths they were attacked by many faithless men who despised the lords, they themselves knew why.

[...]

When the ship had to come ashore, Hercules [i.e., Ulysses] saw an innumerable horde riding toward the vessel. But, fearful man that he was, he fled to the bilge of the ship, and lay hidden there until the twelfth morning.

The worthy knights had to defend themselves immediately against these hateful hell-hounds. They [i.e., the Red Jews] all wore terrible body armor made from horn with whole steel rings underneath, their helmets were very shiny; well-fashioned and skillfully forged, their shields remained unscarred except with great effort from a hand-held a sword. The damned ones [destined to die] desired battle, they wanted the gold of the Greeks and the ship for booty.
The princes had to fend off their threat. 
May God protect the heroes for us! 
The noise of men and striking swords 
was so extremely loud 
that no one 
can accurately describe the prowess 
of these creatures. 
Mighty and terrifying 
was the horror of battle. 
Grim death 
conquered many a man; 
but I don’t curse its cruelty. 
Many a helmet, skull and beard 
were cloven by swords.

Ah, Venus, thou Empress, 
I mean you, praiseworthy Dame of Love, 
stand by your servants 
and free them of all care! 
Her answer: “Friend Wolfram, 
I do not abandon my servants.”

Ajax the mighty prince, 
with manly courage exalted above all others, 
felled many a one in his blood, 
just as the goodly young knight 
Aminall did, whose mighty sword 
injured and cut many. 
This horrifying battle 
lasted until the twelfth day. 
Many a strong Red Jew 
lay dead, wretched. 
At that time 
the balsam was found 
that, still today, in times of affliction 
raises men's spirits. 
Twenty thousand of the Red ones 
were killed on those days, 
and the remainder 
fled to the mountains.
They lived there many years
until a very powerful and good king
defeated them and conquered that land.
That king is known as Alexander.

[...]
Violence and Physical Strength in the Vernacular Legend of the Red Jews

Rebekka Voß, Goethe University, Frankfurt, Germany

Der Göttweiger Trojanerkrieg (1270-1300)

Der Göttweiger Trojanerkrieg, ed. Alfred Koppitz (Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1926), 272-274.

[...]
Rustend aber ze stritte sich,  
Won es in alle[n] sicherlich  
Vor getett nie so not.  
Uff den vil grimenklichen tod  
Wurden sy gevochten an  
Von mengem valschaften man  
Die den heren trügen hass,  
Sy wüsten selber umb waz.

[...]  

Der külle must aber ze lande.  
Hercules [i.e., Ulysses] erkantte  
Daz ain unzalliche diett  
Gegen dem külle geritt.  
Aber der forchtsame man  
In den kül ze grund endran,  
Dar inne er lag verborgen  
Untz uff den zwölften morgen.

Die werden ritter an der zitt  
Müsten aber üben stritt  
An den selben stunden  
Mit laden hel[le] hunden.  
Sy trügend all gemaine an  
Von hornne paldan [i.e. plate?] fraisan,  
Dar under stachel ringe gantz,  
Ir helm waren hartte glantz;  
Gefügett und geschmitt vin,  
Ir schiltt [enliten] on arge pin  
Von kainer hande schwerte[n].  
Strittens die faigen gertten,  
Sy wolten do der Krichten gold  
Haben und och des killes sold.  
Des müsten sich die fürsten wern.  
Got müsse üns die helden ernern!  
Der lütte und des schalles toss  
Ward so unmässenklichen gros  
Da von nach rechte nieman  
Daz wunde[r] volle sage[n] kan
Von diere creature.
Stark und ungehurre
So waz [diu] kampfliche nott.
Der vil grimekliche tod
Twang all da vil manigen man,
Dem ich doch der fraisse nit verban.
Manig helm, schaittel unde bartt
Mitt swerten da gespalten ward.

Ach Vennus, du kayserinne,
Ich main dich, werde Mine,
Bis diinen diennern by
Und tü sy aller sorgen fry!
Sy sprach: “fründ Wolfran,
Der dienner mine ich nit enlan.”

Aiay der [fürsteliche] degen
Mit mannes mütt usser wegen
Valtt ir mangen in sin blütt
Sam tett der junge ritter gütt
Aminall, des waffen braitt
Manigen versertt und verschn[a]id.
Untz an des zwelften tages zitt
Wertte diere jomers stritt.
Manig starker Jude rott
Lag da jemerlichen tod.
Da ward an den stunden
Der balsame funden
Der noch ze manigen [angsten] tütt
Dem menschen dike hochen mütt.
Zweinzig tussend by den tagen
Ward der rotten diett erschlagen.
Och dü and[er] von dan
Hin an daz gebirge endran,
Die sitt her über mengiu jar
Ain vil richer künge claur
Schlüg und betwang daz land.
Alexander waz er genanntt.

 […]
Violence and Physical Strength in the Vernacular Legend of the Red Jews

Rebekka Voß, Goethe University, Frankfurt, Germany

Ma'ase 'Akomut (c. 1580-1600)

Translated by R. Voß

[...] In those days, a black monk who liked to take revenge on the Jews appeared. No Jew could survive an encounter with him. After just a [23a] touch,1 a slap or light tap from him, [a Jew] would die upon returning home [that very day]. After he had murdered approximately 30,860 Jews, the sages gathered and agreed: “We will all die at the hands of this black monk,” so they approached the king with their plight. [The king] then sent for the monk, who appeared before him, saying: “Your highness, what is your desire?” The king said: “The Jews have complained because you have killed so many of them. They are standing there, behind you.” [The monk] turned around, gazed at them and said: “Your should know, I merely touch you out of curiosity.” He then touched three of [that delegation of] Jews, thus stripping them of all power. Upon reaching home, they each died. The Jews cried out to the king again: “Merciful royal highness, if we have been found guilty and sentenced to death according to your law, don’t let the Black Monk kill us [23b] but let us die at the hand of another.” They feared that the king was incapable of protecting them, since the monk had even killed Jews in the king's presence. The king demanded of the monk: “If you wish to abide by my command and enjoy my favor, restore those three Jews to good health and harm them no more!” The monk replied: “I am happy to follow your command and keep your favor by restoring those Jews to life. But give [this message to] your Jews: 'I won't cause [them] further harm, provided that they send me a representative who will engage with me in a sorcery competition before one year has passed. However, if they have not sent me anyone by then, I will slay them all.' I don’t do this for my honor; rather, I

1 Print edition from Fürth 1694, fol. 2a: Even if he just touched against his forehead.
have been long harboring enmity against them on account of their sorcery. If they comply, I will follow your order, Your Majesty, but if not, [24a] I will kill them all; even if I put my own life at risk.” […] Soon the Jews answered with great fear and trembling: “We accept the challenge,” thinking that he [the monk] would easily die within that year. “Therefore, we want to repent.”

[…] [25b] […]

[A seer] recounted [his dream vision] to them [the Jews]: “Dear brothers and youngsters, you won’t find anyone [suitable to compete in the Black Monk's sorcery contest], neither in this country nor in the land of Israel. Rather, you must journey beyond the Sambatyon River, which is never calm on weekdays but [can be traversed] on [26a] Shabbat. Whoever attempts to cross it during the week will surely drown, non-Jew and Jew alike, because the Sambatyon heaves stones from its riverbed that can rupture any vessel. You must recruit a member of the [Ten] Tribes [i.e., the Red Jews] who live in exile there, for they are masters of the [divine] name who will assist you. At the end of our exile, they will also come to our rescue. They are called Sons of Saviors, as is written: ‘And saviors shall come up on Mount Zion to judge the mount of Esau,’ (Obadiah 1:21) meaning that they will participate in judging Gog and Magog on Mount Zion. [The Red Jews] cannot travel across the Sambatyon River, but God will ultimately lead them over dry land.” The [imperiled] Jews responded to the seer: “If God plans to help us with a Red Jew, why doesn’t He provide a sign that He will send one to us? Otherwise we would be compelled to travel there, thus violating Shabbat.” The seer replied: “Indeed, you are right. But you [26b] are not worthy of such a sign and alteration of the [natural] ways of the world that would be required for God to send him to you.” They said to him: “Who would want to go on a journey that entails desecrating Shabbat, to inevitably be judged by the Red Jews [upon arrival]? Anyone who risks his neck on such a mission would hardly earn a place in the Garden of Eden.”

[…] [27a] […]

The [Red Jews] cast lots to determine who would set out [to compete against the Black Monk]. The lot fell on one named Dan, who was old and walked with a limp. […] [27b] This little Red Jew boarded the ship which sailed across [the Sambatyon], where he met the three rabbis [emissaries] sitting there. […] The three rabbis were shocked and remarked: “How can one so
puny and lame possibly stand up to the monk?”² […] When [they saw how] the little [Red] man [28a] hobbled, they [the rabbis accompanying him] thought they would need to support and guide him on their way. But he took the lead and, after only two days and two nights, he had brought them to their destination by taking a short cut, arriving just in time for the sorcerers’ contest. The Jews were overcome with fear […]. They all wept and wailed as they approached the site that the monk had appointed for their confrontation. Upon seeing the little man, they became even more downcast that they […] had been sent a lame shrimp of a man […]. Not knowing what to do, they thought: “Almighty God, how can this little fellow can stand up to this strapping and stalwart monk who has mastered both sorcery and demons?”

[28b]
They [the Jews] were gathered in a large square, positioned below the other witnesses, who stood on a raised platform that had been erected [especially for this occasion], for the monk – per his agreement with the king – planned to kill the Jews en masse once their representative lost [the sorcery competition]. The monk turned to them [the Jews] and exclaimed: “See how the Jews mock me! Why do they present a trembling dwarf for this contest?” The whole of Israel was very frightened, but the emissaries, who had been lead on a miraculous short cut³ by [the little Red Jew] on their return journey, shouted: “Magician, you haven’t yet seen the morrow! By the time our sorcerer is finished, the world will be too small for you!”

[…] The monk began by summoning demons to bring him an enormous steel pole that he planned to use for beating the little [Red] Jew to death.⁴ With the demons’ help, the monk hoisted the pole, which was so heavy that even an entire army couldn’t have lifted, then he cast it into the ground and the earth then [29a] swallowed it. He screamed at the little [Red] Jew: “Now, pull it out again or else all the Jews will be slain, for you infuriate me so much that I will show no mercy. It will be as if you had killed them.” […] The little man responded immediately: “[…] I will pull it out from under the king’s throne.” Wondering about the little [Red] Jew’s words, the king

２Print edition from Fürth 1694, fol. 4b: How can that lame little man possibly stand up to the great monk? He is limping!
３Kefitzat ha-Derech is implied here, a magical practice of traveling long distances with miraculous speed by “contracting the path” via the use of divine names.
４Print edition from Fürth 1694, fol. 5a: In order to pound the little [Red] Jew to pieces.
observed that the little Red Jew dug a hole with one little finger, effortlessly extracted the pole, and cast it so high in the sky that it was barely visible. As [29b] the pole floated in the air, [the little Red Jew] addressed the monk: “Grab it – I have not concealed it. If you cannot reach it, everyone will see your head impaled on this pole today. I will then dispatch it to a desolate wasteland where no one ever strays. You and your [magical] teachers [i.e., the demons] will be stripped of any power over me.” With help from his magic allies, the monk struggled to seize the pole, but he failed. [The little Red Jew] had thrown it to a height that no demon could reach. Unable to meet the challenge, the monk stood in disgrace.

He said to his little opponent: “Let’s try another trick.” Hoping that [the little Red Jew] would forget about the pole, [the monk] conjured two millstones. Right after stating: “I created them,” he ground them between his hands, as one would mill flour or [pulverize] clods of earth or blocks of chalk. The little [Red] Jew replied: “You said [30a] you made them. It’s no wonder that I can’t create something like that because I am not a god. But I petition God’s help so I too can craft such [millstones].” His prayer was followed by a gust of wind that blew the fragments [of the millstones] back together and fused them [once again] into two piles. [The little Red Jew then kneaded these fragments] as if they were clay and formed two millstones, bigger than the monk’s originals, because the wind had collected additional material. He then picked up the two millstones with ease and effortlessly ground them into powder. [He reshaped the millstones] and made a wind carry them upward, to the elevation where the pole was still floating. The onlookers all understood that no one could reach or grasp them, and [the monk] was disgraced yet again. The little Red Jew remarked: “How much longer should I have to bother with you? You’re no match for me.”

[…]

When the monk scanned the sky above him without seeing any of his teachers [i.e., the demons], so he despaired. He went pale, started shaking and pleaded with the little Red Jew: “I would gladly become your servant, just let me live.” [The little Red Jew] answered: “I won’t take your life. I wouldn’t even touch you, although I should kill you. Indeed you deserve to suffer many violent deaths, after having slain so many of my brothers.”

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5 Print edition from Fürth 1694, fol. 5b: The [Red Jew] kneaded the fragments as if they were dough.
[...][31b][...]

[The little Red Jew] said to the monk: “This tall, thick tree has been untouched since Noah built the ark. Since Noah felled the tree [for his ark], this tree has been growing in its spot. I will bend it downward and then you shall hold it to the ground to prevent it from snapping back. Or [if you’d rather,] you can bend it and I will hold it down.” Again, the monk considered performing another trick, [32a] by means of sorcery. But none of the demons were in sight, so he cried and whimpered: “Why did you abandon me, dear masters?” The little Red Jew mocked him: “What is this crying about? Did your father or your mother just die?” The monk, however, didn’t feel like laughing; he wished that he had died long ago because he had no idea how to bend this mighty tree. [...] The little [Red] Jew, however, bent the tree like a twig before everyone’s eyes. [...] Uneasy about his part, the monk was reluctant to step forward, and the little Red Jew shouted: “My highness the king and the entire court of lords, behold this man, [32b] what an unusual magician!” The monk was embarrassed because this was not what he had envisioned. [...] Although he could already foresee his death, the monk had to carry on. He approached the tree with great shame. [...] When the monk finally grabbed it tightly, the little [Red] Jew let go. Immediately, the tree snapped back and strongly lashed at the monk, knocking his head off. And everyone witnessed him being tossed into the air, where his body was caught on the pole, between the two millstones that were rotating [33a] on it, and sent him flying into the wasteland, as the little Red Jew had foretold.

Thus, the Holy One, blessed be He, saved us. Seeing these miracles, all of Israel and all peoples, King Martin von Lanz and all the other kings returned home in peace and joy, for they would never have to fear that Black Monk ever again. The miracle performed by the little Red Jew won favor for the Jews among the king, his judges and all peoples.

[...]
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Ma’ase 'Akdamut (c. 1580-1600)


[...]
אורתא דא יהי דק נחלות דע טע בע טה קרעם רוחט ענגי איצי גיורא. נה טע וכר דער טג אונל דיא עיוד
דיא דא נייטק טור. אונל דא יהי יורה איס גורש ליה[... ] יאור יורה יאור שריריאון אונל שיריך
ביכ די זיך קמק פא טע איטור דא זי וולהש מי דע טור מורה טע זיא ביצאר. זי דיכ מוטש
שטעפל אוריא טע ענגיינן דא איז נוג דע ק璘יניה ומדעם יורה איז מער שיריריאון זון
[...] זי איצי רוגינן מוכ פאיטרש איז שיריריאון ענגי איז קלימיא ענגייאן [...] שירך די זיא אואשלק
גיט ויד הואר זען אש. איז דינידען אלעמעטמר פא 저דים ונא איז אינגי זי איצי קלימיא ענגייאן
ן יברישק פופי איירינא וולין מיטנק דער איז שפער איי. אונל דא גאר איז איזט זי ביצאר
אואל שיריכ עינא גזט
[28 טב]
והעע מד זיא איצי איינא רוגינן פליאיון אונל די יורה שודנוקן אינצן הורוא איז טעפ פלאיון
דיא אנדאערעל איצק איצק פאゼיך הער עז דא איצי זייריאו יראטפם איצק אונל זי ביצאר עז דא יורה טעטן
דא לארע זאלאט דער רופא דיז איי גנייניוו צא אינז שפער דיא זייריאו דיא יורה גירספת איז יורה ואר טור
שטעפל זיז דער רופא גניצ פא זאן שפער דיא זייריאו דיא יורה גירספת איז יורה ואר טור
גנערב צא מיי קירשפת יוט איינז קלימיא פ IDM נולפטי ענגייאן. זיא דר שיריאקצל בל שיראיא.
זארא דיא דיניאשס די איז רוגינן דא עז איז דינידען אייז אינגי קלימיא ענגייאן מיטך איז שיריאן איז
עדנע פלאיון אונל שפער צא ביצאר זיז דער זיוחוש נוק ביצ מורגין גיזעהן עו וירט די דיא
ורעל דק צא ענב מק"[... ]
ן יוה דער טופור מק זיא הושיאריא פא זיאו אירז איזו בירטנרא יראזניאן אייז גוניש שטעפל
שטעפל צא יורה.getMון רע גירניט דער לנל דו יורה מיט צא טunlikely שטיל.3 בהג דיא שטנעק די דא זא אלא
שחואאן דא די יינא קלאאתק דער קון די יראזניאן אואיל אואריאק דיים קרעמ דער שפיים איי דא
ערד זא די אידע ביוגור ב[29א] שולא. נון שאריא פא יורה יורה יורה צא איז יורה הוריט
וירטשה דא שלאוטש אלי יורה דע וורהש מק זיורגין גוצמן. רון יאך מק זיורגין זי
בפיריאט צא ירא גליי צא יורה דע איזהש ארוס איופורט. [...] נון אייטל בד דיז קלימיא מיטנעלד
אואר שפער [...] איי זיורגין יא ננס דער קונית שטנו פירגין בירש ציצ"[... ]
דיא זיורגין יא ננס דער קונית שטנו פירגין בירש ציצ"[... ]
ורואינדרור דער דק דער יורה און די זא סע מוי איינז קלימיא יונגארליאן און. גייב אריאן
לק אונל. דא יורה און איי מיאר אונל אואריאק די איי הוריט. דא מימ דא קום אראדארג
קופט אזן לי [29ב] די אאא צא דער לופספוס שיטע שפער דע רוגינן נוכנ דא איאא איאא דיא
ינס ר היבריר יוגנוסה דא עינא דא זיא אראדארג זעקן די זייר ייריט טייט נול שמטנקן אע דער
שטעפל נא שוק. אונל דא מיאר און דא אימארספיטי. און נורות מיט קני מעגין זי
קופט. אונל דא י保險 יערער זער קני מיט אייפזמק. דא אואלאט דער מיטמק מיט צייר

3 Printing Fürth 1694, fol. 5a: דא קליין יודלן צי דירמר צי מירה.
אגן עטור ירח זית רחל פעמי יבשופן. יא דו עט זית רחל פעמי יבשופן.

[31b] [...]
다고 נוהשים דוּרַים ש_increase בּויאן בּויאם דוען יודלין דז בּיגט דא […] בּיגן צו ניט בּויאם שטרקן דיזן וואושט ער דען 'און וואל ניט יואחלק זיין וור מויינך דעם […] אידרמן אייגן ואר בּיגט שטעקלין קליין איין ור דז ווזז墉 הערן דיא 'און קוויניגגיבּרונר הוך יודלין דז שריה דא קומן ניט וואלט […] אייז מאן איין 32 ואר אייז זין זיין דעם מויינך דער ווען גיןערט אין ליז יודלין דז 'און הקופּפא דוען אים ער דז קרעפטן מיט מויינך דען שמיצט 'און אנטפּור בּויאם דער שנאפּט דער אן שטעקין לויבּ 'און קרעפטן גרושן מיט הויך דער און ליפן שטיין מיויל די 'און שטיין מיויל צוייא דיא צווישן קם לויבּ דער 'און. שטנגאן 33 […]

[...]