Introduction to Sefer Ha-Heshek

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Notes: The manuscript was discovered by Dr. Yohanan Petrovsky. For a detailed analysis, see his article, "The Master of an Evil Name: Hillel Ba'al Shem and His Sefer Ha-Heshek," AJS Review 28:2 (2004), 217-248

Hillel Ba'al Shem was an itinerant ba'al shem (Jewish shaman) who was active in the first half of the eighteenth century. He traveled extensively through Red Russia, Podolia, Volynia and Podlasie and even visited Bohemia, Bessarabia and Bukovina. He studied both with a rabbinic master, R. Zvi Hirsh of Miedzyrzec (Mezerich) Podlaski and several doctors, especially the university trained Abraham Isaac Fortis (Hazak), best known as a leader of the Council of Four Lands (va'ad arba aratzot), the chief institution of Jewish autonomy in Poland-Lithuania.

The 760 page manuscript Sefer Ha-Heshek is a sefer segulot, that is, a guide to practical Kabbala, specifying formulas to write in amulets or pronounce as part of magical ceremonies to achieve specific objectives, medicaments to prescribe for various ailments, techniques of exorcism, chiromancy, metoposcopy, and horoscopy, and more. The majority of problems presented for the ba'al shem to treat were associated with fertility and birth, although there also are prescriptions dealing with diseases and even social conflicts. Extensive use of Slavic words and Christian technical terms points to articulation between Jewish and non-Jewish cultures in the realm of popular mysticism.

Hillel apparently wrote his book in an effort to prove his bona fides as a healer, practical kabbalist and magician. He hints that some ministration of his had gone horribly wrong and this book was evidently part of his effort to regain his reputation and perhaps attain a lucrative position as the resident ba'al shem of some community.

The selected passages highlight Hillel's training, the problems caused by charlatans, the undesirable popularization of mystical techniques fostered by the publication of simplistic handbooks, and the tangled relationship between ba'al shem type practices and "proper" medicine.

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Sefer Ha-Heshek
Hillel Baal Shem, 1739

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1) I, Hillel, lowly and disdained, gradually turned away from all mundane occupations and I thoroughly searched and investigated all of the methods until, with God's help, I found medicament for several medical conditions, as well as many magical expedients that Ashmadai the King revealed to King Solomon of blessed memory. And I functioned, with God's help, in several communities and in several locales, as people saw and can give solemn testimony. All that they saw clearly with their eyes and heard with their ears they testified to, with God as their witness, all of it trustworthy. Thus be extremely careful that this holy book gets into the possession only of one who is pure. He should do and behave according to the fit and proper custom, studying thoroughly how to come close and perform a given ritual. He should be precise in writing the amulets' consonants and vowels as I have thoroughly explained...

2) ...that the great doctor of blessed memory told me-the sage, the leader of all the Polish lands, who was a great expert and adept, named Yitzhak Isaac Fortis (in Latin): In 1654 there was a great epidemic and plague in the City of Rome. Those householders who swept their homes neatly and cleanly and who fumed and decorated with all sorts of beautiful appointments and fragrances and wore handsome clothes; all of them were saved. It is thus good to fume a house and its rooms with herbs and spices that leave a good odor...

3) If some man appears and says that he is a ba'al shem, even though he shows some recommendations from famous, well-known people; even so, he should not be believed until his actions are thoroughly investigated: Is he learned? Does he know the [Divine] names? Where they originate? How they function? Does he act according to proper practice? If so, it is permitted to take amulets from him... Obviously, if a kosher person goes and acts according to proper practice, but, God forbid, it happens that he is slandered, God forbid. Don't judge him[?] guilty until you come to his place; hearing is not the same as seeing. The whole matter is an act of the demons who get angry at someone who is always working [against], dealing with,
getting involved with and provoking them. Since they can't penetrate his immediate four
cubits, they damage his income and not his person.

4) I, Hillel, lowly and disdained in the eyes of the outsiders, but not in the eyes of the insiders; I
inquired and excavated in sorrow, investigating until I found, after several years of wandering
about the country, a tiny bit, a defective taste of the beginning of the holy writings the Rabbi,
the great Gaon, the Hasid, the adept in all of the chambers of Torah, exoteric and esoteric
(except that he himself told me that he never dealt in this business except for once and he
didn't succeed). His name is Zvi Hirsh son of the Great Rabbi called Avram, that is Abraham,
the rabbi and yeshiva head of the community of Miedzyrzecz [Podlaskie], close to Brest-
Litovsk, Tykocin and Wysoki Litewski in Podlasia. I sat and stayed there and from his waters,
the words of the great rabbi, I thirstily drank a bit until I understood a miniscule amount [of
the secret knowledge]. I copied from his holy books and through his agency, with God's help,
gradually I came upon a cure to be able to know how to fix the defects that I caused in the past,
even when wandering in an alien land, until I merit bringing our suit, a case of truth and
justice.

5) This is the fate of Ahitophel who, in ancient times, committed a horrible act. So they found
in the holy book, called Sefer Ha-Heshek ("because he is devoted to me" [Ps. 91:14]), that was
carefully hidden. Seventy-two elders fasted and prayed great prayers, searched, and found it in
an eastern wall-singling out the word "kotel"[wall], that is "qotel"[killer?], and dealing with
them [the demons] and their names—and they succeeded. Then this book went from generation
to generation. Today, however, God save us, they have begun tearing from the very roots. They
have begun printing in Zolkiew some fragmentary books in their own name. One is Sefer
Toldot Adam; [the others.] Mifalot Elokim, Zevah Pesah, Poel Gevurot. Everything was plucked
straight out of the aforementioned holy book and people bought [these books] so that they
came into the hands of riff raff who don't know or understand any book or wisdom; only
whatever is in these little books. They don't know how things occur, and they don't even
perform a proper practice as it is prescribed. Obviously, they don't know the origins or
functions of the names, for they do not have the slightest knowledge even of the exoteric part
of the holy Torah. For all names are derived from Torah verses, either the initial letters,
concluding letters or middle letters of the words; or through other word manipulations such as
ATBA"SH or ALBA"M and permutations and numerical value. All of these [manipulations] are
so that the demons will not understand. There are many types of evil demons, destroying
beings, earth and water spirits, Jewish demons and Gentile demons. Jewish demons also
understand the Torah and the liturgy...

6) If a person's debility, God save us, is innate, or due to food or drink, or a fall in his house or
on the road, or the failure of organs on the inside or outside of the body, then there is no call
for holy names or other such expedients. One must utilize treatments from trained physicians
who study and practice with great physicians, from many many books and are expert in
chiromancy, in signs, or in the science of physiognomy. Everyone must study, understand very
well, and know the nature of the human being so that the patient will not be harmed, God forbid.

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לעקרות מקושי אקוורוס הפקתה לדפסם בק"ק אקולוגו כותב החקבל ספורים בשמם אוד ספר תולדות אדם במעLifecycle של


arked תרסומם ספורים קטנים מאכלי וודרי אחר אברים מגוונים אפילים בצמודים קש חיתוך ואילגר ושמת שאר הנשף.

השפת ההורים וזאינך רמאיים שאإيمה שלーム ידעיה אפיל בנראה של תורס הקדושש של השפתו יוצאי מוספקוחה המר"ת

וט"ז ארמטג תיבות הבשרא יחוגנ[1] הדנייאן א"ב"ש אלכל"ם יצוריפו ומספריםhoa האכל ממית משלא ביני ההצהוגב בואש

ישו כהמ תפוסיה הזרוגים ויתן מימיי פארים פימיי יהודא שידי אראמי יוהודא ג"כ הסיום הנהיה

ותפרולו...[ נות.]

(6 [פגמ.]

ואז החוהשה באה ד"לאהמ ר"ל מצע הובטוא ואמכה אציו אכיללאה ואשתיה ואמהות פומיה בהתיו ואברך ואינאוכמדלה

[מכולה] האברים התנסים התוך ואלהים היא זניCAF עכלת של שמייה קדושיה ואשר עניינו זניי הלחשב הכורהולתן של

רופאים מומחים לתלמודים והנצרת על דקורור גולים של ספורים ההברה והבריה בקראי ביתא ידיעי ל聲明ו ואסיד התום

הפרצת ראשל צרכן ליימד זרכיו לתוך טוב מזא ובליוע התמעת אמסל נקח ח"פ ח톨 מל

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