Mayse-Bukh and Metamorphosis

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This analysis of metamorphosis in the Mayse-bukh, the editio princeps, printed in Basel in 1602 by Konrad Waldkirch, was prompted by the fact that this collection of agadot from the Talmud and the Mishnah, in addition to tales and legends, contains narratives on this ancient myth well-known in Greek and Roman antiquity, and transmitted primarily through Ovid’s and Apuleius’ Metamorphoses. However, the Old Testament also contains a story of metamorphosis; namely, King Nebuchadnezzar, who is turned into a beast (Daniel, 4.30). These narratives were rediscovered and “moralized” in the Middle Ages and were highly popular, but their “pleasurable” function was in a sense displaced by belief in witchcraft, whereby metamorphosis was viewed as the emanation of malevolent and satanic power, and resulted in collective hysteria and witch hunts. Throughout history – and even today in particular in the cinema – the most persistent form of metamorphosis is lycanthropy, which comes from the story of Lycaon who was turned into a wolf in Ovid’s Metamorphoses. The Mayse-Bukh, as a product of European literature where the theme of metamorphosis – in particular werewolves – was dealt with abundantly, makes its own contribution to the metamorphosis literature as can be seen from the examples including a remarkable werewolf tale it includes.

The number of metamorphosis tales in the Mayse-Bukh is low, but they chart the evolution of perceptions of metamorphosis: first a miracle, then a punishment, and finally the work of the devil. What makes these narratives even more interesting is not only the fact that women are involved, but that they play a key role. The woman is the catalyst for metamorphosis, since in certain cases, and as was the custom at the time, this role was based on the stereotype of the woman as seductress and evil. This, however, only serves to highlight the underlying feature of these narratives; namely, a metaphoric discourse on the body, and naturally the woman’s body, which goes through metamorphosis to give birth. This enigma of birth is at the root of a dual male role that is found in narratives of the myth of origins. For instance:

1. Man reverses the natural order of things by becoming a “womb”: in Greek mythology, Athena is born from Zeus’s head and Dionysius from his thigh; in the old testament. Eve comes from Adam’s rib.
2. In contrast, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, man “demonizes” woman, who is denounced as a witch or sorceress with malefic powers.

In the Mayse-bukh, the stories dealing with metamorphosis can be classified into three categories:

1) Human metamorphosis
   a) A man turns into a woman: “Of a man who nursed his child at his breast.” (10)
   b) The child does not have the same skin color as the parents: “Of a powerful king who could not have children with his wife and the fervent prayers he made” (134) and vice versa: “Of a king and a queen who were both black and the queen gave birth to a child who was all white.” (249)

2) Demonized metamorphosis, inseparable from witchcraft: To seduce someone, Satan turns into a temptress: “About Rabbi Matya, son of Harach who never looked at an unfamiliar woman in his life.” (247)

3) Animal metamorphosis, also the work of the devil: A human being is turned into an animal, an animal into a man or both at the same time;
   “About a man whose last wishes were for his son to buy the first thing he would find in the

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1 I deal with this topic briefly in an article on “La femme dans le Mayse-bukh. In: Le yiddish. Langue, culture, société. Mélanges du CRFJ. CNRS Éd. 1999 (pp. 39-64).
marketplace” (143).

“A beautiful story that happened to a wise man who was also a very rich man in the land of Ouz.” (227). The animals involved are a frog, a werewolf and she-ass.

Although only a handful of stories in the Mayse-Bukh deal with metamorphosis, they are nevertheless significant, both because they were included in the volume and also for the role they play. They create a continuity between Antiquity and the Middle Ages, since they are found in Talmud agadot, such as the witch a Rabbi turns into a she-ass which he rides to go to market (Sanh. 67b), and in narratives dating back to medieval times, such as the tale of a werewolf (227) written directly in Yiddish. This particular story, both by its attempts to give it Jewish content, as by a remarkable blending of influences, is presented as deriving from Biblical times, by linking this deeply rooted medieval belief with King Solomon, one of the key figures in the story. Talmudic legends about King Solomon’s ability to dominate and use demons were very popular in Europe at that time. What an excellent illustration of cultural transfer! What occurs is a reintegration, based on the metamorphosis process, of a process affecting both the narrative itself, the Mayse, an emerging genre, at the crossroads of oral and written text, and the narrative structure of the book, which is highly complex because of the diversity of material, and is illustrative of a reformulation in situ and not, as has been claimed, a poor reproduction of earlier writings. In addition, this narrative operates through Yiddish, a rapidly-expanding language in constant change. Thus the Mayse-bukh can be situated on the threshold of modernity which would later trigger the transition from imitatio to mimesis: little by little, writing is no longer seen as a reworking of earlier texts; rather attempts are made to free it from the strictures of written text, take on more autonomy, and confer upon the author, (man or woman, and after God), the stature and faculties of a demigod. This is why the hand of its compiler, Yaacov Buchhandler, can clearly be seen behind the anonymity of the collection, in the arrangement of the stories in a sequence, and the choice of a certain number of them. Doesn’t in fact the compiler state in the introduction that he wishes to write a book of this type for his (female) readers’ enjoyment?

The thread unking the collection as a whole together is knowledge – knowledge shared by men and women, knowledge arising from education and erudition, and teleological knowledge. This form of knowledge in particular will bring to fruition the fundamental metamorphosis intended by the Mayse-Bukh; the one that will enable the coming of the Messiah, and will overcome death. Death is the theme of the two stories selected deliberately to begin and end the collection: the first is an agada from the Talmud (Shab. 13a-b) “On the Premature Death of a Scholar” and the last is from the Sefer Hassidim, “A Pious Man who Died Leaving Rare Books.”

What is striking about these two titles is the presence of death, characteristic of the Humanistic period, a death that strikes down both young and old (as for instance, the painting by Hans Baldung Grien, The Young Girl and Death) or the skulls and ‘danses macabres’ in artwork. The first story in the manuscripts of Rovere and Innsbruck, the precursors of the Mayse-bukh6 was radically different. This narrative was a hymn to life, to Jewish life, which told the story of Abraham’s childhood and how, miraculously, he had emerged unscathed from the limestone oven. In contrast, the two stories in the Mayse-bukh seek answers to the vagaries of life and events, and the way to overcome death. The first story, which is not included in the Rovere and Innsbruck volume, deserves reanalysis as to its role.

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2 Guit- 68a. In the Mayse-Bukh, “On King Solomon who wanted to build the Temple and who was forbidden to use iron.” (105)
3 Ovid’s Metamorphoses describes Lycaon transformed into a wolf and Apuleius’ Golden Ass about a man turned into an ass. These narratives, “moralized” in the Middle Ages and linked to the biblical stories of Nebuchadnezzar became the model for the “transformatio hominum in bruta.”
4 See Michel Jeanneret: Perpetuum mobile. Métamorphose des corps et des œuvres de Vinci à Montaigne. Macula (no date!).
5 Death is a topic in and of itself, and merits in-depth investigation. It has three sources. In most cases death is the rightful punishment for sins committed. It can also be a mistake on the part of the angel of death. Thirdly it can be horrible and unjust murder resulting from anti-Semitic persecution. Death only causes the punishment to cease if expiation for sins has been fulfilled in this world. If not, it will continue in the world-to-come.
and presence in the collection. It should be read first of all as an implicit demand for sexual recognition on the part of women, in terms of procreation, and secondly as a condemnation of a husband who although a great scholar, does not fulfill his marital obligations and hence commits a two-fold sin:

1) He impedes preservation of the “image of God” in the world because “the person who does not take part in the reproduction of the species is considered by the Scriptures as having diminished it, in other words, the resemblance.”

2) He prevents the conception and hence the coming of the Messiah. Study prepares for the coming of the Messiah. But what is the point of studying Torah day and night if one does not have descendents to transmit it to? This idea of transmission is fundamental. It reappears in the last story, where an old man sees his beautiful book collection dispersed after his death. Although some people are sorry, others believe he deserves his punishment since in his lifetime the scholar had always refused to lend his books, committing a grave sin. Scholarship for its own sake is not enough. Erudition must also obey the commandments.

A rereading of these two stories that frame the collection and are drawn from tradition, shows their major meaning: they claim women’s right to sexuality\(^8\) as well as the right to education and erudition. By extension, this claim which is based in the text on a man’s transgression of laws he himself made, assigns women a mission of prime importance: recalling men to their obligations. This warrants interpreting these narratives as highlighting a reversal of roles. Woman incorporates ‘masculine’ knowledge and man expresses himself in a ‘feminine’ language, Yiddish. Symbolically we are witness to a metamorphosis that recreates the lost union of male and female elements. One of the reasons why Yiddish was so criticized was perhaps the extraordinary ability of this “androgynous” language to generate metamorphosis, eliminating the strict boundaries between the sexes. The story of the man with breasts should also be read in this same “androgynous” perspective.\(^9\) This unusual story, mentioned in the Talmud, is the oldest narrative of this genre. It refers to the first creation, when God made man in his image, i.e. man and woman. Very recently, a Swiss medical journal published a long article on this phenomenon\(^10\) mentioned by Aristotle and found in several places in the Talmud.\(^11\) The text itself, however, which even in Talmudic times included the debate as to the interpretation of such a metamorphosis, is related in the *Mayse-bukh* to medieval concerns. This may explain why the story of the man who breastfed his child was selected.

Rabbi Yosef said: “Look to what extent this man must have been remarkable, for the Holy One Blessed Be He to accomplish such a miracle for him.” Abaye said: “That is not so. This man must have been very evil for Creation to have been changed for him.” Rabbi Yehuda said: “Look how difficult is the fate of man, since the Holy One Blessed be He must provide him with food; in fact the Holy One Blessed be He went so far as to change Creation for him and allowed a man to nurse his own child, although it would have been easy for the Holy One Blessed be He to find food for the child. Thus the man nursed his own child instead of finding food for the child. We see that the Holy Name May it be Blessed performs many miracles, that He protects men rather than giving him food, since we do not see the Holy One Blessed be He filling the houses of the Righteous with wheat.”

The debate on belief in metamorphosis raises the theological problem of divine creation, because it challenges its perfection. Implicitly the text contains a reproach, based on the fact that the Talmudists themselves considered milk to be an aphrodisiac. This is because on the eve of Yom Kippur, the High

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\(^8\) See Jacob Katz: *De la tradition à la crise. La société juive à la fin du moyen âge*. Cerf 2000. In this book, the author mentions that in the Middle Ages, edicts had to be passed in favor of women whose husbands left them for years in order to study and whom, considered to be *agunot*, did not have the right to remarry and could hence not have official sexual lives.

\(^9\) This Talmudic story does not appear in the manuscripts. See also the very popular story in the Middle Ages of the daughter who nurses her father and mother in prison to save them from death. These stories clearly have a relationship to the pictorial representation of the Virgin and deserve investigation.


Priest was forbidden to drink milk.\textsuperscript{12}

This text illustrates the fact that metamorphosis is a discourse on the body; in this case, the androgynous body. This corporal discourse is complemented by a discourse on knowledge. In the \textit{Mayse-bukh}, the sexuality linked to erudition tends to be associated with the Jewish woman. This deviates considerably from the view of feminine sexuality in masculine fantasies, where in stereotyped narratives, the woman is assigned her traditional role as seductress. Narratives of the latter type are numerous and serve basically to test rabbis’ degree of virtue. Among female vices, adultery ranks high. Co-territorial literature provides many examples, such as \textit{Discipline}, \textit{Clericalis} by Petrus Alphonsi or in \textit{Schimpf und Ernst} by Johannes Pauli. Adultery and infidelity play a major role in medieval literature, and were both real and symbolic. They were real in cases where men went off to war (Christians) or to study (Jewish), or symbolic in cases such as courtly love, whose prime tenet was suffering and unrequited love.\textsuperscript{13} Discourse on sexuality that makes thematic use of adultery is a masculine form of discourse par excellence, and one that captures men’s fears of women. This is the key to interpreting the metamorphosis of the devil into a woman for purposes of seduction.\textsuperscript{14} The devil requests God’s permission, as for Job, to tempt a pious Rabbi, Rabbi Matya son of Harach who “never looked at a woman aside from his wife in his life.” To do so, the devil turns into a woman:

“so beautiful that no one had ever seen one as beautiful as she was. She was lovelier than Noemi the sister of Tubal-Cain, who seduced the angels during the time of Noah. He went to stand opposite Rabbi Matya son of Harach. As soon as he saw her. Rabbi Matya turned his back. So the woman also changed direction. Each time that the righteous man tried to avoid her, she would stand in his way hoping that he would desire her. Rabbi Matya said: “I fear that the evil instinct is gaining hold of me and will subjugate me to the point that I commit a sin, God forbid.” What did the righteous man do? He called one of his disciples who assisted him and told him to bring him red-hot coals. Then the righteous man burned his eyes out. When he saw this, the Devil, horrified, fell backwards, so convinced he was to be able to make him commit a sin.”

The Devil’s failed attempt at seduction is clear proof of the power of God and the constancy of piety.

The diabolic nature of metamorphosis is thus a crucial feature, yet this process cannot begin without the agreement of God who remains the master of all things... and the woman who acts as the triggering element. An example of this can be found in a long, very well-known story included in the manuscripts in Hebrew. Translated into English by Moses Gaster and into French by Israel Levy, it is entitled “About a man whose last wishes were that his son buy the first thing he saw at the market” (143) and involves the tribulations of Rabbi Hanina, one of the leading figures in the collection, here asked to cope with a male frog.

“I am,” said the frog, “the son of Adam, the first man and he had me with Lilith during the one hundred and thirty years when he was separated from Eve. And the Holy One Blessed be He gave me the ability to metamorphosize myself and to take on any appearance and any shape.”

This story has some similarities with the previous one. The diabolical element is represented by Lilith, the queen of the devils, who gave birth to a hybrid being. This son, metamorphosized into a frog with God’s blessing, has been sent to tempt Rabbi Hanina. How? By making it difficult to carry out his father’s last wishes, who on his death bed, tells him that he will be rewarded for his efforts. In this long story, full of ups and downs – itself an excellent example of cultural transfer\textsuperscript{15} – Lilith loses her diabolic side and her son, who becomes an instrument of God, will reward Rabbi Hanina for his filial piety, which at no time in fact appeared to be threatened. From its profane version in the Grimm

\textsuperscript{12} \textit{ibid}, p. 538.

\textsuperscript{13} See Edouard Gourevitch: \textit{Le guide des hassidim}. Cerf 1988 (467 sq).


Brothers’ fairy tale the Frog King (Der Froschkonig) where the princess’s cruelty and aggression enable him to recover his human form, the story here has a religious goal: it responds to good with good, rewarding Rabbi Hanina and his wife for having cared for him while risking their lives.

“She taught him all the Torah plus the seventy languages so that he could understand the most diverse ones... She taught him the healing properties of each (plant) and brought all of it into the house of Rabbi Hanina.”

Knowledge of pharmacopoeia as female knowledge appears often in the book and corresponds to actual fact. The most famous example in the Christian world is that of Hildegard de Bingen. This knowledge, which is once again related to knowledge of the body and its metamorphoses, remains bound to mystery and magic. This is not only because this is an imitatio of classic models - the knowledge of unguents by female magicians in Lucanus’ Golden Ass, who was Apuleius’ model, but rather the outcome of a polysemey which needs to be decoded. Implicated in the mystery of life, the woman is a “polymorphous perverse,” possessing the secret of metamorphosis. In other words, she possesses the knowledge that has the power to transform, to alter. Importantly, over the course of time, the possessor of knowledge changed. In Lucanus and Apuleius, man is desirous of the knowledge of witches. He discovers their secret through seduction. In the Middle Ages, by contrast, the woman seduces the man so that he will reveal his secret. This is what happens for instance in the Roman de la Rose:

“His wife drew him towards her... and she took him by the neck and kissed him, then put his head between her breasts: ‘My husband’, she said, ‘what is the news’?”

In the Mayse-Bukh, in a story entitled “A beautiful story which happened to a great scholar who was also a rich man in the land of Ouz” (227) we feel the weight of reprobation on repressed sexuality, which is never clearly mentioned, because the place where the “extortion” of the secret takes place is the bed:

“But his wife was not satisfied with this response and never stopped bothering him, as is woman’s bad habit.” (227)

What is this secret? The rabbi, impoverished, has become rich again because he discovered a magic ring. He finally confides the secret to his wife, which he would never have done if he had listened to King Solomon! Scarcely had she taken hold of the ring that the evil woman dives under the coverlet and turns him into a werewolf. The negative discourse on sexuality becomes manifest through the stereotype of the evil, treacherous woman who wishes her husband ill, i.e. by maintaining him in all his beastliness. This is what the rabbi, it should be said, was already doing, by calling his wife a dog (brekin) and a whore (hur); after numerous twists and turns, the rabbi regains his human features and punishes his wife by metamorphosizing her, ad vitam aeternam, into a she-ass. Kicked by her husband, she must carry enormous blocks of stone to build Solomon’s temple. She is so lustful that she goes as far as to mate in the street where everyone can see! Thus woman is prisoner of her true nature. In Lucanus and Apuleius, a man turned into an ass is an object of curiosity and sexual jealousy, but not opprobrium. When he finally finds the bouquet of roses that will turn him back into a man, which finally happens, his lover, disappointed, leaves him.

It would be too lengthy to list the models here – where metamorphosis and infidelity are often combined - taken from Antiquity and reinvented in the Middle Ages. I will simply mention the main representatives of metamorphosis tales: Chrétien de Troyes, Marie de France, Gervais de Tilbury. However, although the werewolf story was written in the Middle Ages, it was very timely when the Mayse-bukh was published. Throughout the 16th century (and later) the werewolf was a major figure and there were countless trials (Pierre Burgot and Michel Verdun in Besancon in 1521; Peter Stump in Bedburg near Cologne in 1589), brochures and pamphlets (the execution of Peter Stump), wood engravings (Lucas Cranach the Elder) and copper, illustrations, narratives, sermons (Johann Geiler von Kaiserberg) all dealt with one single subject. The Jewish community’s interest in this topic can be seen in Johann Weyer (1515-1588) a court Jew and physician, who was opposed to this belief and considered lycanthropy to be a mental illness. The story in the Mayse-bukh bears striking similarities with the European literature; the differences lie in the way the text is made more Jewish, the most

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17 Stories of werewolves should be compared to the theme in Aarne and Thompson (449), “The Czar’s dog.”
important of these being the rabbi-as-hero. The werewolf for instance writes his misfortune in Hebrew in the snow. Compare to a satirical story told by Theophile Laube, where a wolf writes in German “in a peasant’s heavy hand”. Similarities and differences form an in-depth study of this “Jewish” werewolf who rightfully enriches the pantheon of werewolves!

The tale of the rabbi-werewolf which appears below, and draws heavily on tricks, appears “old fashioned” as compared to the aims of the Mayse-Bukh. This is because it reduces the woman to well-worn cliches: ignorance – which can be one of the readings of the she-ass – and seduction. However this metamorphosis must be deciphered, because it may also be seen as a retreat into silence or a break down in communication. Note that in the story women intercede, but in vain, to beg the rabbi to give his wife her human form back.

This presentation, which has highlighted the conflicting features of the female role and image in different discourses, leads to the intriguing suggestion that women produce a profound metamorphosis of the body of man, a metamorphosis which is always astonishing, since it is ‘magic’. In Greek and Roman mythology, metamorphosis, the privilege of the gods, was a source of pleasure and ravishment, whereas the Middle Ages, by contrast, were haunted by a terrifying and unknown body, primarily the female body. This suggests that sexuality was masked or negated, but emerges more clearly through analysis.

A wonderful tale that happened to a great scholar who was also a very rich man from the land of Ouz (227)

Tale. A remarkable rabbi lived in a country called the land of Ouz. He was extremely rich and could speak seventy languages. This rabbi was the head of a large Talmud academy and had many valiant students. With his money he raised many young boys and enabled them to study. He always had a hundred students in his Talmud academy. He also presided over an association for the poor and there was a continual coming and going of the poor at his house. In short, the rabbi was a very pious and very good man, blessed with all the qualities one can expect from a Jew. On the other hand, the rabbi had a very mean wife who could hardly stomach these stories and viewed these activities with a very dim eye. She couldn’t stand to have a poor person in her house. And as the proverb says: when the rope is stretched to its fullest, it breaks. This is what happened to this pious man, because he became poor to the point of not being able to continue his generosity to poor people, or his students or his young boys as he had done in the past. The rabbi said to himself: “My God, what am I going to do? Haven’t I spent my whole life giving without counting and doing good for the love of God and here I am so poor now? So be it! I willingly accept this trial to which the Holy One Blessed be He has subjected me because the Holy One Blessèd be He commits no injustice; who knows what sin I am guilty of?” He thought: “Why should I complain this way that I have nothing at all? There are always people to be happy about the misfortunes of others!” The rabbi thought: “Here is what I will do: leave secretly (F 175v) so that no one will know what has happened to me.” And he called his best students to him and said: “Dear students, I am sure you are know how I devoted I have been to you to this day: I have fed you, clothed you, and taught you. Now I am going to confide a secret to you hoping that you will behave towards me as I have conducted myself towards you.” The students all said: “Dear Master, confide your secret to us, we will be at your side, and will remain so as long as God gives us life.” The rabbi said to his students that he had to leave, because he didn’t know what had happened for him to have become so poor. He wanted to ask them to come with him. “I still have a few florins which I would like to spend with you. Who knows? Perhaps one day the Holy One Blessed be He will give me back my wealth and then you will benefit from it with me for the remainder of your days.” The students all said: “Dear Master, we will do what you require from us; if you like, we will go together: everything we have – our money, our clothes, we will share with you that’s why you should not

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worry!” So the rabbi started out with a few of his students and left the place. It was impossible
to know what had happened because the rabbi left without saying anything. When the poor
people and the unfortunates saw that the rabbi had left, they were panic-stricken; so were too
the young boys in the association for the poor and the other students he had left with his wife.
As for him, he went with his students. Wherever he went, he was honored, it was only fair. No
one was surprised to see him traveling. Everyone thought he was going to a Talmudic academy
to study. After a year or two spent crisscrossing the country, their clothes were no more than
rags and their money had naturally disappeared. They were dependent on what people gave
them. There were 50 of them and wherever they went, people closed the door on their faces,
because they didn’t know who they were dealing with, vagabonds or students. In the end, the
students got tired of all these wanderings and said to the rabbi: “Dear Master, when will we
finish with all these wanderings? We have no more money, we have no more clothes, we can no
longer tend to our needs. This is what we are going to do: we are going home, to our parents’
houses (f 176r) but we will not say how you are or where you are. We want to get married,
because we are getting old and people are shutting the door in our faces because they think we
are vagabonds.” The rabbi thought for a moment and then said: “I do not criticize you; on the
contrary, you have shown great loyalty to me as I did to you. But stay with me one more day, or
four or five, until the end of Shabbat and then I will let you leave. Perhaps before then the Holy
One Blessed be He will grant us wealth and we can go home together.” The students said: “Of
course dear Master. We have stayed so long with you that we can stay a little more until the end
of Shabbat.” So they went off together and got to a ditch. The rabbi said to his students: “Go on
a little without me. I must relieve myself.” The students continued along the way devoting
themselves entirely to study and Talmudic debate. After he had finished, the rabbi wanted
to wash his hands. And there he found a tiny fountain; he went to draw water to wash his hands.
When he was just leaving, he saw a tiny weasel running; it had a lovely little golden ring in its
muzzle. The rabbi ran after it until it dropped the ring. The rabbi picked it up. Then he saw that
the golden ring was worthless. But he saw that it bore an ancient inscription. This is what was
written: “Even though I am not pretty to look at, I am priceless.” The rabbi was a great scholar;
he thought that the ring must have special powers, and he started to think over all possibilities
imaginable. What power could this ring possibly have to make it priceless? Then he thought:
“perhaps it is the magic ring you can use to wish everything you want and that everyone is
talking about?” He thought: “let’s try!” He began to wish that the Holy One Blessed be He
would enable him to find a pouch full of gold on his path. And he continued on his way. Then
he saw a pouch full of gold in front of him just as he had wished. He recovered his love of life
and went to join his students. “Dear students, rejoice! We are coming to a town where I still
have a friend who is very rich. I will ask him to lend me money because (f 176v) he doesn’t
know that I am so poor. I will buy you clothes right away and you can go home.” But he didn’t
want to tell his students that he had found a ring: they could have taken it from him or they
could have denounced him and he would have been forced to give it up. The students were
delighted to have new clothes and were not at all surprised. They did not look for any further
explanation and took the rabbi’s word at face value. They reached the city. They stayed one
day. The rabbi went immediately to clothe his students in splendid garments of velvet and silk;
he himself dressed as he did in the past. He stayed there a week or two and devoted himself
very seriously to studying with his students. He was honored, which was fair, because he knew
what a scholar should know. One day when he went to the city he bought a beautiful carriage
where one would expect to see a prince. He said: “My dear students, let me pay you back for
everything you have lent me, and then we will head home.” The students did not look for any
further explanation and believed that it was his relative in town who was very rich who had
perhaps lent him once again several thousand ducats, that is what they had been told before, so
that he could return home honorably. They headed off on the road home. At places where
people had shut the door in their faces, they now honored him. When the rabbi had been far
away, the people had lost their love of life. But now the news was spreading that the rabbi was
coming back with his students and in all his finery! How happy the poor people were! Everyone
ran to meet and greet him because no one knew that poverty had been the cause of his departure
and everyone believed that he had left to study. The rabbi resumed his former habits: he gave to
charity, he ran his large Talmud academy and he enabled young students to devote themselves to study. He had been back for a certain time when one Shabbat – he customarily took a nap before studying the commentaries with his students – when one Shabbat while he and his wife had gone to take a nap and they had told each other all the news, his wife asked him where all the money was coming from, since when he left they had been in the bleakest of financial states before his departure. (f 117r). The Rabbi said: “The Holy One Blessed be He enabled me to do a good piece of business on the way.” His wife, however, wouldn’t take this for an answer and kept badgering him, as is the habit among women, until our good Rabbi let himself be convinced and told her the real secret. However he made a serious mistake, because King Solomon said: “Never tell secrets to your wife, because she will end up revealing them.” This is in fact what happened, as you will see. If he had not told the secret to his wife, he would have avoided the torments he was to suffer. He told her the real secret of the ring: as soon as you made a wish, it was granted. The Rabbi’s wicked wife thought “If I had the ring, he would never see it again during his lifetime!” She would have willingly taken it off his finger but it would not come off unless he agreed. She said: “Dear husband, give me the ring a few minutes, let me look at it more closely!” The Rabbi, knowing the extent of his wife’s wickedness, didn’t want to give it to her. But she started to cry, saying “I see that you don’t love me, because you don’t want to give me the ring and you don’t trust me.” And she didn’t leave him alone until he put the ring on her finger. As soon as she had the ring on her finger, she put her head under the coverlet and wished: “Make my husband turn into a werewolf and let him run to the forest to be with the other wild animals!” No sooner had she spoken the last word that her husband jumped out the window and ran into a large forest called the Forest of Bohemia. He started devouring people who went into the forest and caused such devastation that no one dared go into the forest alone because they were afraid the werewolf would get them. The wolf built a dwelling in the woods so that he would stay dry in his forest surroundings. Even the woodcutters who were in the forest all ran away because they were afraid of him. But let’s leave our poor werewolf alone for a moment and see what happened in the house with his students. Because it was time for the Rabbi to study the commentaries, his wife, may her name be eradicated, said “At the moment your master can’t study the commentaries because he doesn’t feel well.” She succeeded in convincing the students and they left. The next morning they came back to study. She said to them: “Your master has gone away. Once again he did not tell me where he was going. I think that in four years he will be back.” She pretended to be very unhappy but in fact it was a trick on her part, may her name be eradicated from the face of the earth. And once again she would not let the poor people come into her house.. So the poor once again longed for the Rabbi. In fact, this dog was very rich, because all she needed to do was to make a wish to have anything she wanted; her wealth was incommensurate and unlimited. Nobody knew what exactly had happened to the Rabbi and no one could know why he had disappeared so suddenly. On the contrary, everyone thought he would return as he had done the last time. So let us leave this horrible cheat and return to our good rabbi, the poor man, who was wandering in the woods in the form of a werewolf, and no one knew. He was a scourge, eating people and animals, because there is no animal stronger among the beasts than a werewolf. They asked the woodcutters to come and asked them if they could capture the werewolf. They said: “No, because he is stronger than a lion” and in addition very intelligent, as though he were acting like a man.” The king heard about this story and immediately organized a hunt in this forest, but he couldn’t capture the werewolf, because he was too smart. Traps were laid, but to no avail. However there was one woodcutter in the forest who the werewolf never harmed. On the contrary, they were friends and the wolf was always near his cabin. But for other people, it was out of the question to go into the forest because they were all terrified of the wolf. So the King proclaimed that the person who could capture the wolf, dead or alive, would be given the King’s daughter and would rule over his kingdom after his death. The King had an advisor who was still single; a hero who was very strong. He said: “Sire, if you will keep your word, I will try to kill the wolf, because you know that I have often fought in wars and I have never been

19 The Tosafot, notes appended by the grandson of Rashi and other French writers to Rashi’s commentaries on the Babylonian Talmud.
vanquished. I will thus try my luck one more time.” The King promised to keep his word. So the advisor armed himself from head to foot, persuaded that he could kill the wolf. He went to the woodcutter whom the wolf knew (f 178 r) and said: “My dear man, show me where the wolf lives and were he is!” When the woodcutter saw that the advisor wanted to attack the wolf, he was seized with fright, because he was afraid that the knight would die, which is what had almost happened to him with the werewolf. He said to the advisor: “My Lord, what are you doing in this wild forest? If the wolf realizes you are here, you are a dead man, even if you have extraordinary strength.” The advisor said: “My dear man, show me where he is, because this is why I came, it’s because I’ve decided to kill the wolf.” The woodcutter said: “I beg you.” The advisor said: “Come, let’s not tarry, we must do it.” So the woodcutter said: “If it must be, may God show mercy!” And he went with the advisor to the part of the forest where the wolf roamed. The advisor took his harquebus and spear and went to meet the wolf. He was sure that as soon as he saw the wolf he would kill it with his harquebus. Realizing that someone wanted to kill him, the wolf leaped aside and jumped at the advisor’s throat: he threw him to the ground and wanted to kill him. Quickly the woodcutter came up and made the wolf leave. But the advisor didn’t want to give up; he wanted to try to attack the wolf again. The woodcutter intervened once again. The advisor attacked the wolf for the third time; the wolf was overcome with violent anger and wanted to rip the man apart. The advisor begged the Holy One Blessed be He, to save him from the wolf’s claws, saying that he wouldn’t attack him any more. Immediately the wolf let him get up. He started wagging his tail to charm the advisor like a person who wanted someone else to like him. He didn’t want to leave him and walked by his side all the time like a dog running in front of his master. The advisor would have liked to get rid of him, because he was frightened out of his wits by him, but the wolf ran alongside him, wagging his tail. So the advisor took off his belt and could hold the wolf on a leash like this by his side. He escorted him through the forest. When another beast came to hurt the advisor, the wolf killed it and when he saw a hare or a fox, the wolf killed it to take it to the advisor. Finally the advisor took the wolf into the city to the King. The King and his advisor were seized with fright, because (f 178 v) they were terrified of the wolf. They had heard so many stories about him, that he had killed so many people, that the King himself was seized with fright. He told the advisor to take the wolf back. The advisor said: “Sire, don’t be afraid of the wolf. I will let you cut off my head if he hurts anyone, if no one tries to hurt him. On the contrary, he killed more than one wild beast to save my life and captured more than one.” He thus kept the wolf with him and took good care of him. The advisor told how the wolf had taken pity of him and had left him alive, although the wolf had the right to kill him because he had had the upper hand three times. This is why the advisor took good care of the wolf: he gave him the daintiest morsels to eat and drink, and not the worst. And when the advisor went out hunting, he took the wolf and as soon as he saw a beast, never mind what kind, the wolf chased for the advisor. Because the King had promised his daughter to whoever brought back the wolf dead or alive, and because the advisor well deserved his reward in all fairness, the King kept his promise and gave him his daughter as well as half of his fortune. When the old king died, the young king inherited the whole country. He still had his wolf, because he didn’t want to abandon it during his lifetime, because the wolf had spared his life and moreover, had enabled him to possess the kingdom. This was only justice that he should take good care of him. Once, there was a winter when there an enormous amount of snow fell. The young king went hunting, taking his wolf with him. As soon as the wolf got outside, he started wagging his tail and going straight ahead, smelling something. So the King galloped after him and surprised the wolf digging in the snow with his paw. Coming nearer, he saw writing in the snow. When he saw the writing the king was very surprised and said: “You can’t be sure that the wolf knows how to write. Someone maybe put a spell on him and he was a man before; there have been many other cases like this.” But no one could read what was written. They called in all the scholars, but no one could decipher the inscription. The King had an advisor who could read the holy (f 179 r) tongue. He said: “Majesty, it is a Hebrew inscription” and began to read it. Here is what was written: “Dear King, remember the friendship I have shown towards you. I did not tear you to bits when

20 Hebrew.
I had the upper hand and had the right to do so; on the contrary I spared you and I helped you acquire your kingdom. It so happens that I have a wife in the town of – he named the town – who put a spell on me using a ring and turned me into a werewolf; if I cannot get hold of this ring I will be a wolf for my whole life; but if I can get the ring back, I will turn back into a man like all other men. This is why I want you to remember the great loyalty I have shown to you. Go to this town and bring me back the ring which my wife has, as a sign of friendship. Or else I really will kill you!” And he showed him a mark which would allow him to identify the ring. This is what was written on the snow! After having been informed of the content of the inscription, the king said: “Of course I will help you and even if I risk my life! Immediately he set out with three servants and rode to the town where he had been told and where the rabbi’s wife lived. He pretended to be someone who bought beautiful rings and Frankish antiques and for whom nothing was too expensive. He called the Jews together to ask them whether they had old Frankish gold, rings or precious stones, anything. The Jews said: “We are only poor people but there is a woman here who has beautiful jewelry, rings and also precious stones. So he asked the Jews to tell him where this woman lived. They thus took the king to this woman without knowing that he was a king. They simply believed that he was a merchant. When he saw the woman he said: “Tell me Madame, I have heard that you have rare old gold and old rings in gold, never mind if they are encrusted with old precious stones or worked in the old Frankish manner, show them to me! If I like them, I will give you a good price.” He showed her a lot of beautiful things and made her believe that he had bought them on the road. The woman said: “I would be happy to show this gentleman what old gold and golden rings I have.” She went into her bedroom and came back with beautiful jewelry. They had never seen such beautiful ones. The King himself was surprised to see a Jew with such beautiful things, (f 179r). On a ribbon where rings were hung, he saw a golden one. The king thought: “how can I get this ring?” – He took the rings in his hand and thought, “If only by the grace of God, the wolf already had the ring!” He said to the woman: “How much do you want for your rings?” He was careful not to show the ring. She said “So and so hundreds of florins.” My good king bartered two rings with her, stole the ring without her realizing it and paid the woman for her rings in gold. He left and went home. He was already on the way home when the woman discovered that her ring was missing. She could not do anything at all because she did not know the merchant. How the widow was distressed! No one of course knew why and she could not tell anyone. When he got back, the king gave an enormous banquet and invited all the princes in the kingdom. While he was seated at the table with them, he asked for the wolf to be brought to him. The wolf came bouncing in, wagging its tail, so great was his joy, because he knew that the king had gone to get the ring, but he didn’t know whether he had brought it back. He kissed the king, he petted the king. Seeing that the wolf was cajoling him like this, the king took out the gold ring from his pocket and showed it to the wolf. But if the king had known the powers of the ring, he might not have given it to him. But the king put the ring on one of the wolf’s paws. Suddenly a naked man was standing in front of them. When he saw this spectacle, the king immediately covered him with his coat of fox fur. Then the one who had been a wolf jumped with joy and said to the king: “My dear man, I beg you, let me return home because it must be three or four years since I haven’t been home. This is why I have asked your permission.” So the king said: “My dear friend, you can leave whenever you wish. But if you ever want to stay with me you can stay your whole life at my table, because my whole life would not be enough to pay you back for the good you have done to me.” At this, he went home. The king showered him with gifts. The Rabbi said: “Sire, you doubtless saw that I have enough money at home. This is why (f 180r) I don’t need your money. In fact, you have shown me enough gratitude by bringing me back the ring because if I had not been able to get it back I would have been condemned to being a werewolf forever.” But if the king had known the secret of the ring, he would not have given it back to him so quickly because even though the king had many jewels, he possessed nothing comparable to this ring which he could not have bought for all the gold in the world. The Rabbi made his provisions and headed out. On the way back, he called his students around him, dressed them in black velvet and returned to his town. When he reached the gates to the city, he made the following wish: “God willing that my wife, may her name be eradicated from this earth, be turned into a she-ass, let her be in the stable and eat from
the same trough as the other beasts!” No sooner had he spoken the last word that his wife was turned into a she-ass and was at the back of the stable and started eating from the same trough as the other animals. At the same time, it was announced far and wide that the rabbi was back, with fifty valiant students, all dressed in black velvet. The whole community came out to meet him and gave him a resounding welcome. They would have like to have known where the rabbi had been all this time. The rabbi said to them: “Be kind and don’t ask me any questions! As for me, I won’t tell you where I have been during this time.” The rabbi pretended not to know what had happened to his wife, although he knew full well that she was in the stable. He asked his household: “Where is my wife? Why isn’t she here? Perhaps she couldn’t stand to see me coming home with fifty students?” His household said: “Dear Master, if it won’t make you afraid, we will tell you.” The rabbi said: “I won’t be afraid.” So his household said: “Dear Master, when we learned that you were coming home, we ran to your wife to tell her the good news, but she had disappeared and up to now we don’t know what has happened to her.” The rabbi was not very afraid; he let nothing show and said “I think that when she has been away as long as I have been, she will come back.” He returned to his former habits: give charity to the poor, run a Talmud academy, study, do good deeds. Everyone was happy. He had been back a certain time when he gave a delicious banquet, to which he invited the whole town, and when everyone was more than full, he said that as of the moment (f 180v) the Holy One Blessed be He had brought him home, he had made a wish to build a beautiful synagogue and all the stones that it would need, a she-ass would carry them. He was referring to his wife, of course, but the other people did not know he had turned her into a she-ass. The people said: “Dear Rabbi, may the Good Lord strengthen you in your resolve so that, with a pure heart, you will fulfill your wish as soon as possible.” Between times the she-ass had stuffed herself and was enormous. In addition, she mated in front of everyone, like an animal who has no shame. But when the rabbi began to make her carry stones, she became very thin; and each time the rabbi saw that she wouldn’t budge, he kicked her sides saying: “You dog, go, all the wickedness you did to me! May lightning strike you!” And he wore out the donkey to such a point that she was all skin and bones. This situation lasted for some time and no one except the rabbi knew what his wife had become. When he had finished building the synagogue, the rabbi gave another banquet to which he invited all of his wife’s female acquaintances. When they were all full to the brim, the rabbi began to tell the whole story to her friends: all the wickedness she had done to him, how the Holy One Blessed be He, had helped him regain his health, the spell he had put on her so that she would stay that way until her dying day. When they heard the story, the relatives were seized with fright and took pity on her. They begged the rabbi to forgive her this time saying that she would never do it again. But the rabbi didn’t trust her any more. A short time later, the rabbi died leaving an enormous fortune to his children; the ring disappeared and his wife was forced to remain a she-ass. This is why King Solomon said you should never confide a secret to a woman because if he had not told his secret of the ring to his wife, the rabbi would not have had the misfortune to be forced to wander in the forest. But he paid her back and rightly so. Those who think they’ve set a trap find themselves trapped. The End. That is the story.

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