

A LOST JEWISH POET: THE CASE

by David Basch (3.16.12; rev. 8.22.17)

To those unacquainted with the evidence, few subjects will appear as unpromising as a Jewish Shakespeare. However, most curiously, the finding of strictly Judaic elements in his plays reveals the Bard's knowledge of Talmud, Midrash, and Aggadah — literatures all but unavailable in the England of his time.

While skeptics may reject the diagnostic worth of even some Judaic elements found in the work of an early modern author who has demonstrated a prodigious knowledge of world literature, its presence, easily confirmed, poses a major challenge to scholarship. Why has this Judaic content been little accounted in earlier study? How did Shakespeare gain access to this literature? Does it appear in patterned, revelatory ways? These are among the questions assayed here.

Exhibit A of the evidence would present a sampling of Shakespeare's use of Talmudic materials. Some of this appears in easily identified lines, such as "*What's mine is yours and what is yours is mine,*" and "*Sin will pluck on sin,*" appearing, respectively, in *Measure for Measure* and *Richard III*. While both lines are drawn from the Talmud's *Pirke Avoth*, their simplicity is such to pass them by unnoticed. But each of these lines sheds telltale light on their respective plays. For example, the citation in *Measure for Measure* is one of four statements in *Pirke Avoth* that conveys differing attitudes towards material possessions. Of these, "*What's yours is mine and what is mine is mine*" is identified by the rabbis as the view of the wicked. Interestingly, the version used in *Measure for Measure*, "*What's mine is yours and what is yours is mine,*" is identified as the view of an ignorant person. Since it is Duke Vincento that takes this as a marriage offer to Isabella, placed in a rhyme — "*Isabel,... if you would so incline, What's mine is yours and what is yours is mine*" — it appears as a comment on the character of the Duke, who, in the play, is observed to have brought on all the complications of the play by his unwise choice of an untried young man to replace him in his absence.

Similarly, the line spoken by Richard III, "*Sin plucks on sin,*" reveals the heart of Richard as that of a man determined to be

fueled in his behavior by continuing sinful acts of evil. Of interest is that the continuation of this Talmudic line, which runs to "*sechar mitzvah mitzvah*" ("*the reward of doing a deed of the commandment is the doing of a deed of the commandment*") is to be found in the play, *Coriolanus*, spoken in praise of Marcius, a man who "*rewards his deeds with doing them.*" From this it becomes evident that the Bard has more fully rendered this Talmudic line. Note here, in this second part we are actually given a "derash" (an interpretation) of this part of the citation and not merely its translation since one of the meanings of "*the reward of a mitzvah is a mitzvah*" is that the deed is its own reward, as his deeds were for Marcius.

But these are only two of the many lines of *Pirke Avoth* which Shakespeare can be found to have quoted in his plays, some identified earlier to the surprise of ordinary Talmudic scholars.

And lest it be surmised that Shakespeare restricted himself to sayings from *Pirke Avoth*, of which there were some earlier Latin translations — a satisfactory explanation of how these ended up in the poet's work, although this typically fails to recognize the depth of the usage in adding to the understanding of the plays in which these were found — we find numerous examples from other portions of the Talmud that had not been translated.

For example, King Priam in *Troilus and Cressida* presents the Mishna's five penalties to be paid by one who injures another. Priam notes this in telling his sons that the Greeks have offered to strike off these exact five penalties were the Trojans to restore the kidnapped Helen. Says Priam, "*Deliver Helen, and all damage else, as honour* (transformed from shame, "bo'shes"), *loss of time* (she'vet), *travail* (tzaar), *expense* (re'pou'i), *Wounds* (ne'zek) ... *will be struck off.*" The point of learning of this generous offer by the Greeks is that it sheds light on Troy's deliberate determination to persist in its criminal behavior that brings on the enemy forces that lead to the city's destruction.

Even more marvelous are some of Shakespeare's plays that dramatize books of the Bible and serve as parables of biblical wisdom. While the Bible, of course, was widely read in the England of the poet's time, what is revealing are the allusions in these to parochial Judaic elements and literatures virtually

unknown to Gentiles of the period. Thus, Hamlet, which is a cautionary tale, is in effect a parable vivifying precepts of the Book of Ecclesiastes, and in doing so uses such things as Talmudic controversies to make its points. For example, are you allowed to take the word of a heavenly spirit to resolve legal issues on earth? Also, there are Talmudic speculations which appear, such as the prospect if not the certainty of facing God's judgment in the afterlife about which Hamlet mulls over — "*To be or not to be*" — in rejecting suicide as a way out of his problems.

Similarly, King Lear turns out to be Shakespeare's interpretation and explication of the deeper truths of the suffering of the righteous in the Book of Job, as had already been identified by some independent scholars commenting on the poet's play.

More veiled, but no less a dramatization of a book of the Bible, is The Merchant of Venice. This play conveys in disguised form the themes of the Scroll of Esther, including, surprisingly, its Judaic triumph. Thus, both works feature a proud, traditional Jew as central. In both, a woman must be won to marriage through a "*lottery*," shown by Portia and Nerissa's use the term to describe Portia's father's covenant that requires her to marry a suiter who solves the riddle of "*the three caskets*." While to learn of these aspects and more requires careful attention to details of the play and knowledge of its many particularistic Judaic allusions — much too complex a matter to summarize in brief — some signs of this are most explicit.

For example, while Christians consider mercy to be the grand hallmark of their religion — implied by Portia's world famous speech on the transcendent value of mercy (incidentally drawn from a line from ben Sirah, a second century, BCE, Jewish sage) — when Shylock's enemies have brought him down to utter defeat, they do not show him their vaunted mercy. Shylock is stripped of all his wealth — all of which given to his enemy, Antonio, or brought under his control — and he is forced to convert. This is hardly the practice of the wonderful mercy espoused by his enemies — one of many such reversals in this play, which, when revealed, stamp the play as the poet's version of the type of play, called a *Purimshpiel* — *Purim play*. These were plays written by

Jews of the European Ghettos in honor of the holiday.

Concerning direct historic evidence, British historian, Peter Levi, in *The Life And Times Of William Shakespeare* (1986), reveals that Shakespeare's father, John, was left a legacy, recorded in a preserved court document, in which John's name is given as "Johannem Shakere." The historian seemed not to know that "Shakere" has a Hebrew meaning as a form of the Hebrew word "sheker," meaning "false." The word as "shakere" is pronounced exactly in the Ninth Commandment in the prohibition of bearing "false witness" (eyde shakere). This suggests an identity as a crypto-Jew, especially when the word is considered in connection with Isaiah 63:8 — "*They are my people, children who will not be false*" (*lo ye'SHA'KE'Roo*). Apparently, at the time of the Shakespeares, not being false was an impossible condition if a Jew wished to live in England where Jewish residency was illegal, the Jews having been earlier banished almost 400 years before.

Have we here more circumstantial evidence ultimately signifying nothing? Once again, the skeptic will find no sanctuary. For the evidence demonstrates that Shakespeare knew the meaning of this name and its portent since he found ways to interject it into some of his plays in dramatic form. For example, in *Richard III*, we find evil Richard knocked off his horse that had given him power and speed and now limping toward defeat. In one of drama's most memorable lines, Richard cries, "*A horse! a horse! my kingdom for a horse*" — a most clear sign that Richard thinks a horse will save him. This recalls the words of Psalm 33:17, which emphatically answers Richard: "*False is the horse for salvation*" ("**SHEKER** *ha'soos lit'shu'ah*"). Appearing here is the poet's Hebrew name, sheker/shakere. Shakespeare repeats this dramatic device featuring his name in allusions to biblical verses at least three more times in his plays — an amazing accident of chance if that is what these are alleged to be.

The poet also represented this name in his 1596 Coat of Arms. The original application for this still exists and includes a tell-tale sketch of his arms and a motto, "*Non Sanz Droicht*" ("*Not Without Right*"). The sketch features a falcon, a species known from falconry in English as a "*saker*" — consult an English dictionary

for this word. "Saker" is a name that obviously resembles "shakere." Note that, when spelled in Hebrew, the letter that begins it, the "*shin*," can be pronounced either as "s" or as "*sh*."

Furthermore, when analyzed, the configuration of the coat of arms, which depicts the saker standing on one foot and shaking a spear, reveals the poet identifying himself as a son of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. (See a reproduction of the coat of arms on the last page of this article.) Illustrative of how these identifications are made, the bird standing on one foot recalls the Talmudic account concerning the sage Hillel, in which a prospective convert to Judaism offers to do so if Hillel teaches him the entire Torah while he stands on one foot. Hillel accomplishes this in a teaching that happens also to be embraced by Shakespeare's motto, "*Not without right*." Thus, Hillel taught that the essence of the Torah is embraced by the view, "*What you hate, do not do to your neighbor*," encompassing forms of conduct taken "*without right*."

The poet's motto appears drawn from Genesis 18:25, in which the Patriarch Abraham pleads for the inhabitants of the city of Sodom, saying that, if God destroys the wicked together with the righteous, "*the judge of all the earth will not do right*." Translating Abraham's plea into a behest gives the adage, "*Not Without Right*" (*al be'li mish'pat*), revealing the source of the poet's motto and the poet as a disciple of the teaching of Abraham. Other allusions similarly link the poet's Coat of Arms to Isaac and Jacob.

Finally, there is the evidence to be found in Shakespeare's Sonnets. Its 154 poems can be revealed as patterned on the 150 biblical Psalms, many of which sonnets showing up as parallels to correspondingly numbered psalms, including some directly addressing God — *Who turns out to be one of the mysterious friends of the poet*. For example, Sonnet 30's couplet of gratitude — "*When I think of thee (dear friend), All losses are restored and sorrows end*" — parallels that in Psalm 30 which similarly thanks God Who "*has changed my mourning into dancing*." Concerning mourning, the sonnet mourns for "*precious friends hid in Death's dateless night*" and is actually a "*sheloshim*" — which literally means *thirty* in Hebrew — alluded to in the sonnet's number 30. A "*she'lo'shim*" is a traditional Jewish follow-up public remembrance

for a departed person thirty days after burial, as the poet seems to well know.

We soon learn that Shakespeare's poems are hardly odes expressing the feelings of a man in thrall to unholy passions, as some commentators have alleged. The poems are actually dedicated to higher purposes, in which the poet's friends addressed include God and allegorical representations of aspects of man's soul — the good inclination, represented as a handsome, idealized version of the young poet, and the evil, terrestrial inclination represented as the "Dark Lady" — both inner dimensions of the poet. Other sonnets concern odes of gratitude to meaningful friends of the poet as well as to spiritual mentors — some of whom being historic personalities well known to readers.

These sonnets testify to the wisdom and love of the Creator in fashioning our human nature, even as they exemplify the highest levels of the poetic art. The poems are beautiful and rich in insight, plumbing the most profound depths of life experiences.

The trail of these Judaic elements in Shakespeare's work, left as clues by the greatest of poetic communicators, await fuller scholarly exploration of a kind that has to this date hardly begun. This would reveal the source of the poet's enormous contributions in fashioning the illustrious, world renowned vision of his English birth-country. This was a contribution suffused with a universality so well expressed in Judaic literatures such as the encyclopedic tractates of the Talmud that was his heritage, which had enriched the poet's intellectual and religious consciousness far beyond that contributed by his rural environment in a tiny, obscure portion of his land.

The book noted below uncovers many of the poet's hidden codes in the poet's sonnets:

THE SHAKESPEARE CODES: The Sonnets Deciphered (2000) Book jacket statement by Rabbi Emanuel Rackman, Chancellor, Bar-Ilan University, Israel and New York:

Once again I have the pleasure of reading more of David Basch's work concerning Shakespeare's links to the Jewish people. True to the promise of the title of his new book, **THE SHAKESPEARE CODES**, he has indeed been resourceful in finding the Poet's own "codes." As before, Shakespeare is shown to draw on literary devices only accessible through an understanding of their Judaic sources. These are seen to provide unique windows to his inner thoughts on many personal and general topics. Coming from the eminent Poet, what is learned will undoubtedly be an important addition to his legacy to the world. It will surely be of enormous interest to the Jewish community and will inspire many to take a renewed and deepened interest in their traditions and learning that had so moved the Poet.

Rabbi Emanuel Rackman
Ador 1 5760 - February 2000

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Non Sanz Droicht ("Not Without Right")

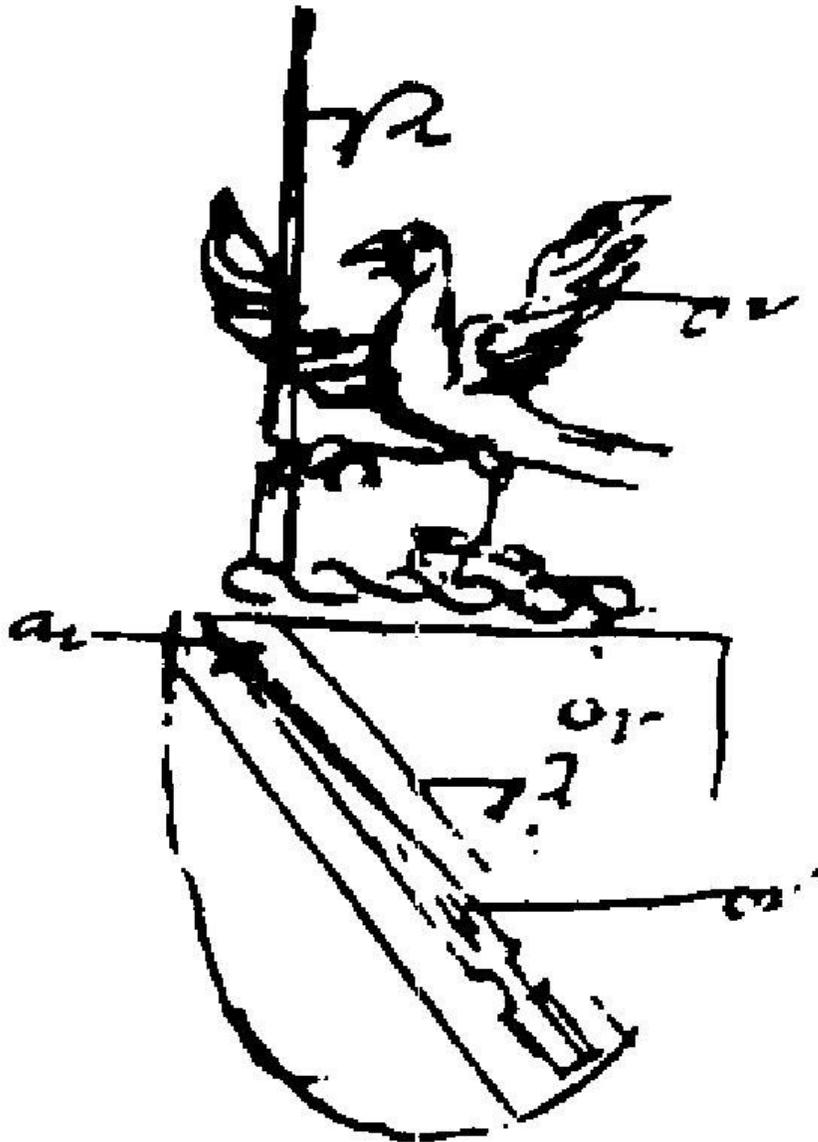


Figure 2-1