

JEWISH MAGIC AND SUPERSTITION

A Study in Folk Religion

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Foreword by Moshe Idel



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concluding that the Perchta cult had found a place in Jewish ritual and belief. At most, all we can read into the *Berches* is an odd assimilation and survival of a long meaningless word.⁴⁸

A chance remark in a thirteenth-century code leads us to perhaps the most interesting item in this catalogue. Jewish practice required that before entering the ritual bath all obstructions on the body, such as jewelry, which might prevent contact of the water with the skin, must be removed. The question arose whether a man or woman whose hair is badly matted must cut off this impediment to complete contact before bathing. "My opinion," our source states, "is that we should not require people to cut their hair when it is tangled and matted like felt, a condition called in German ש"יילק, and in French פלטר"ד, for this disarray is caused by a demon, and we consider it to be courting mortal danger to shear such hair." The terms are obscure. A later authority, quoting this first one, comments, "ולק"ט"ט [probably another transliteration of the word represented by פלטר"ד] is what we call "הול"א לוק"א." The riddle is solved! These last words are the German *Holle-locke*, of which ש"יילק (spelled also in the first work ה"יילק"ש) is no doubt a variant; פלטר"ד must be the French *feltre*, *feutre*, our "felt."⁴⁹ The belief that in the night demons entangle the manes of beasts and the hair of humans is very widespread; we may recall Shakespeare's lines:

This is that very Mab
That plats the manes of horses in the night;
And bakes the elf-locks in foul sluttish hairs,
Which once untangled much misfortune bodes.

Who was this Holle after whom the elf-lock was named? Among the ancient Teutons Holle, or Holda, or Hulda, appeared as an ugly old witch, with long, matted hair and protruding teeth. In medieval Germany she had developed into the demon-witch who gobbles up children. She was held responsible for entangling hair at night; "er ist mit der Holle gefahren" was said of one whose hair was disheveled and knotted. Corresponding with *Holle-locke* is the term *Hollenzopf*.⁵⁰

The lady made her way into Jewish life in her other rôle as well. It is reported that as early as the fourteenth century the ceremony called *Hollekreisch* was widely observed in Jewish circles in Germany. The Jewish boy receives his Hebrew name on the occasion of

his circumcision; the girl child usually upon the first Sabbath after birth. Since the earliest days of the dispersion, however, Jews have also borne names drawn from the nomenclature of the people in whose midst they reside—names we may term secular or vulgar as distinguished from the Hebrew, the classical name. These secular cognomens usually correspond in one way or another to the Hebrew, whether as colloquial forms or translations, or related only by sound or appearance. The ceremony of the *Hollekreisch*, which marked the bestowal of its secular name upon the child, comprised these features: the baby (or the cradle containing the baby) was lifted into the air three times, usually by the children especially invited for the occasion, and each time the name was shouted out by the guests in unison. Often this shouting followed a formula. In modern times such formulas as "*Hollekreisch!* What shall this child's name be?" with the appropriate response, or "*Holle! Holle!* This child's name shall be . . .," have been employed. In the seventeenth century the custom of *Hollekreisch* was observed in naming boys and girls only in South Germany, while in Austria, Bohemia, Moravia and Poland it was not used for boys at all, and only rarely for girls.

The earliest writer to speak of this custom, Moses Minz (fifteenth century), explained the term as a combination of a Hebrew and a German word—*hol*, "profane, secular," and *kreischen*, "to shout, call out"—which would render it "the ceremony of calling out the secular name." This explanation was accepted and repeated in the later references to the practice. A modern writer has derived the first part of the term from the call "*Holla!*" But it is unlikely that these explanations even approach the truth. As we have seen, *Holle* was the demon-witch who attacked infants; in this respect she provided a close parallel to the familiar *Lilit*. The further correspondences between the two: their connection with the night; the distinguishing physical feature, long hair, which they had in common; their propensity to attack prior to the naming of the child; all of these made the identification of the two a natural one. Shouting the child's name, which is mentioned in all the references to the ceremony, and tossing the infant in the air three times, were devices intended to drive off the demon *Holle*, and her fellows, just as in the *Wachnacht* ceremony on the night before the circumcision measures were taken to ward off attacks by *Lilit*. So close a parallel to Jewish belief and practice as that embodied in the *Hollekreisch* could

have found no difficulty in winning a wide popularity among Jews.⁵¹

We are not yet ready to dismiss our unsavory friend Holle-Hulda. We must follow her devious course in Jewish folklore one step farther, though here we shall leave her playing a more attractive rôle. In a thirteenth-century manuscript there appears an invocation, in Middle High German written in Hebrew characters, to this self-same lady, Hulda, this time the goddess of love. In this passage there is a reference to Hulda's *hof*, which is nothing else than the famous Venusberg of the *Tannhäuser* *sage*. "Der Venusberg ist Frau Hollen Hofhaltung, erst im 15. 16. Jahrhundert scheint man aus ihr Frau Venus zu machen," wrote Grimm. Ugly, cruel Holle becomes the lover's goddess, Venus! And thus she appears in a fifteenth-century Hebrew-Yiddish love-receipt: "Secure an egg laid on a Thursday by a jet-black hen which has never laid an egg before, and on the same day, after sunset, bury it at a crossroads. Leave it there three days; then dig it up after sunset, sell it and purchase with the proceeds a mirror, which you must bury in the same spot in the evening 'in Frau Venus namen,' and say 'allhie begrab ich diesen spiegel in der Libe, die Frau Venus zu dem Dannhäuser hat.' Sleep on that spot three nights, then remove the mirror, and whoever looks into it will love you!"⁵²