

“FOR A PRAYER IN THAT PLACE WOULD BE MOST WELCOME”: JEWS, HOLY SHRINES, AND MIRACLES—A NEW APPROACH



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Recently, a small booklet entitled *Gliding over the Lips of Sleepers*, designed especially for recital at the supposed burial site of the first century sage and head of the *Sanhedrin*, Rabbi Gamliel of Yavneh, was published in the modern Israeli town of Yavneh.¹ In the introduction, author Eitan Zan’ani, a Jew of Yemenite descent, chose a quotation from *Sefer Ha’midot* (*The Book of Merits*, associated with the teachings of the late eighteenth-century Hassidic master Rabbi Nachman of Braslav) in praise of the visitation of such grave sites and the recital of prayers in *loca sacra*: “For by visiting these graves of the righteous and by prostrating oneself upon them, the Holy One, blessed be he, grants favors even if one is totally unworthy of them.” Turning to a “healing saint” in moments of distress is a longtime and cross-cultural phenomenon. Still in existence today, it was common practice among medieval European folk as part of a range of response methods used when a kinsman or neighbor fell ill or was found in a debilitating situation. In many cases vows were made by the ill person himself, his immediate kin, or members of his close social circle to go on pilgrimage to the shrines of healing saints. Such visits were understood to be part of the healing process. Through close physical proximity to the saint, and by touching his or her relics and artifacts, one could invoke the *berakhah* implicitly associated with such figures, by assuming that a commitment was made to “convince” the saint to intervene on

¹ This article is based on a chapter from my doctoral dissertation, “Social Attitudes Toward Marginal Individuals in Jewish Medieval European Society” (The Hebrew University Jerusalem 2002). I thank my advisors Prof. Avraham Grossman and Prof. Michael Heyd for their constant aid, commitment, and wise council. A short version of this paper was read at the 3rd International Hagiography Society Workshop, Budapest 2004. Friends, colleagues, and mentors have read this paper and commented on it; I thank Avriel Bar-Levav, David Berger, Jay Berkovitz, Alick Issacs, Ora Limor, Dina Ordan, Adiel Schremer, and Israel Yuval. I owe special thanks to Patrick J. Geary and William C. Jordan for their insightful comments, sharp critique, and constant encouragement. The research for this project was supported by the generous assistance of the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture and by the Halpern Center for the study of Jewish Self Perception at Bar-Ilan University. Most of the work on this article was carried out during my stay at the Center for Jewish Studies at Harvard University 2004–2005. Of course, “if I am at fault ... my fault remains with me” (Job 19.4). In the course of work I refer several times to *The Book of the Pious* (*Sefer Hassidim*); this extraordinary source of Jewish culture in medieval Europe survived in a few manuscripts. The largest is MS Parma Palatina Heb.3280. In 1891 this MS was copied and published in Berlin by J. Wistinezki. In 1924 a better edition, based on Wistinezki’s work, was published in Frankfurt am Main; it is cited throughout as SHV. The second version of the *Book of the Pious* survived in an early print from Bologna (1538). R. Margaliyot republished this version in Jerusalem in 1957, cited throughout as SHM. Alfred Haverkamp Peter Schäfer, and Israel Yuval are currently leading a team of researchers (Saskia Dönitz, Rami Reiner, Rene Richtscheid, and others) working on *Sefer Hasidim*. This project, “*Juden und Christen im 'Buch der Frommen'* (*Sefer Hasidim*)”—Edition, Übersetzung und Kommentierung ausgewählter Texte zur Geschichte der Juden und der jüdisch-christlichen Beziehungen im mittelalterlichen Deutschland, will eventually lead to a

behalf of those in need. During this process prayers were recited and donations and contributions were pledged to the saint's shrine or cult in exchange for the saint's miraculous powers to help the sick and those in need.

Jewish ritual life, and especially popular religious culture, is quite diverse with regard to such matters. Even in modern Israel, pilgrimages to the shrines of Jewish sages of late antiquity, as well as important contemporary deceased rabbis and mystics, is not an uncommon phenomenon. The shrine and elaborate structure over the resting place of the twentieth-century Moroccan Jewish mystic Rabbi Yisrael Abuhatsira (known among his adherents as the *Baba Sali*) in the southern Israeli town of Netivot has become much more than a mere pilgrimage site. It has also become a place where politicians come to rub elbows with potential voters, where *Bar-Mitzva* ceremonies are held, and where people come to pray, hoping that the holy man's spirit, affiliated with the burial site, will serve as an intermediary between themselves and the divine (fig. 1). Similar phenomena occur in the assumed burial place of the first-century sage Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai to whom the lore of *Kabala* is traditionally attributed. Rabbi Shimon's elaborate, though eclectically structured, shrine in the Galilean village of Meron, not too far from the Galilean city of Safed, is one of the most popular—if not the most popular—site of Jewish pilgrimage in modern Israel, beside the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem. On the day Bar Yochai's memorial service (*Hillula*) is observed (the eighteenth day of the Hebrew month of *Iyar*, corresponding to *Lag Ba'Omer*, the thirty-third day of the traditional spring counting of the *Omer*) several hundred thousand people attend the festivities and prayers.² It is a multicultural event and although not all the pilgrims who visit the shrine seek the healing powers of the saint, many arrive in the hope that the sage's powers will aid them in some way. Some return to the shrine to fulfill a commitment or vow they had undertaken; still others return on pilgrimage to express their thankfulness and gratitude. There are some who come to attend the *Hallakeh* ceremony (the traditional first haircut of three-year-old boys), thought by adherents of this ritual to be of special merit when preformed at this site.³ From a phenomenological point of view there are, of course, similarities as well as

better edition and a translation of some of *Sefer Hasidim*.

² In this field one should refer to Israeli anthropologist Yoram Bilu's ground breaking research, primarily (I cite here only articles published in English): "The Inner Limits of *Communitas*: A Covert Dimension of Pilgrimage Experience," *Ethos* 16.3 (1988) 302–325; "The Making of Modern Saints: Manufactured Charisma and the Abu-Hatseiras of Israel," *American Ethnologist* 19.4 (1992) 672–687; "Encountering the Sacred: Saint Veneration and Visitation Dreams among Moroccan Jews in Israel," *The Sacred and its Scholars: Comparative Methodologies for the Study of Primary Religious Data*, ed. Thomas A. Idinopulos and Edward Yonan (Leiden and New York 1996) 89–103; "Moroccan Jews and the Shaping of Israel's Sacred Geography," *Divergent Jewish Cultures: Israel and America*, ed. D. Dash-Moore and I. S. Troen (New Haven 2001) 72–86. See also H. E. Goldberg, "Gravesites and Memorials of Libyan Jews: Alternative Versions of the Sacralization of Space in Judaism," *Grasping Land: Space and Place in Contemporary Israeli Discourse and Experience*, ed. Yoram Bilu and Eyal Ben-Ari (Albany 1997) 177–201.

³ This ceremony, common among the Hassidic community, consists of celebrating the first trimming of the hair of three-year-old boys as an initiation rite. In many cases this ceremony predates the young child's admission to the *Cheder* schooling system, thus symbolizing the transfer of male children from the feminine domestic realm of their mothers (symbolized by long hair, which is a feminine attribute) to the realm of masculinity symbolized by trimming of the hair and the subsequent admission to the realm of the "learned." This aspect of the pilgrimage to Rabbi Shimon's ascribed burial site was also investigated by Yoram Bilu; see "From Milah (Circumcision) to Milah (Word): Male Identity and Rituals of Childhood in the Jewish Ultra-orthodox Community," *Ethos* 32 (2003) 172–203.

differences between these contemporary observances, which take place within traditional Jewish social circles, and the phenomenon of pilgrimage to holy shrines in other areas of the world, as well as in premodern societies. Pilgrimage appealed to people from all walks of life for various reasons: religious commitment, social standing, and as a memorable event of great importance.

Jews were not always so enthusiastic about pilgrimage to shrines of departed sages and dignitaries, nor were they always expressing their enthusiasm about prayers offered there for healing and deliverance from illness. The attraction this socio-cultural phenomenon enjoys today owes much of its potency to the emergence and widespread acceptance of Lurianic Kabala, (originating in the sixteenth century) in both European and non-European Jewish circles. The importance of the notion of *Tikkun* (spiritual reform or regeneration) in Kabbalistic lore and theology is of great importance in this respect. The eighteenth-century Eastern European Hassidic movement, which was strongly influenced by Lurianic teachings, promoted this notion even further. However, when we examine the evidence from pre-Lurianic Western Europe we find that in response to the Christian custom of going on pilgrimages to gravesites in order to seek the healing powers of the saints, Jews launched what appears to be a full fledged attack on this Christian practice. Some medieval European Jews denounced the Christian belief in the healing powers of the saints as evidence of the more all-encompassing doctrinal error of Christianity that led to grave misconceptions in both the faith and its practice.⁴ However, a closer look at Jewish sources shows that the Jewish attitude to this practice was not altogether negative and may even be described as ambivalent. This makes the matter all the more fascinating in light of what appears to be a true Christian challenge to the Jewish value system and its code of practice.

Before delving into the intricacies of the medieval Jewish attitude toward pilgrimages to shrines and the healing powers of the saints, a word or two about the study of pilgrimage in general, is in order. The medieval phenomenon of pilgrimage to shrines and holy sites has recently received renewed scholarly attention. Previously published works from the 1970s have been revised and more recent works have taken a fresh look at the medieval accounts of pilgrimage and employed new analytical tools and approaches. By applying new methods and drawing on methods from socio-religious anthropology as well as on new modes of textual analysis (literary criticism, and postmodernist, feminist, and gendered readings of medieval sources), modern scholarship has altered the scholarly perspective and has begun painting a rich and diverse picture of medieval life and times. In the specific case of pilgrimage, the revisiting of the *miracula* collections has shed new light on the author’s intentions, hidden agendas, *mentalité*, and value system.

The growing awareness of the “silenced” and “muffled” voices found in premodern textual accounts of pilgrimage is part of this important scholarly revolution. Voices of the “other”—the unlettered, female, or other disenfranchised components of medieval society—are now regarded as those to whom modern scholarship must listen, trying

⁴ Jews were not alone in expressing an opposition to Christian pilgrimage to the shrines of saints in the Middle Ages. Within medieval Christianity itself we hear voices that expressed reservations towards this religious phenomenon. See G.Constable, “Opposition to Pilgrimage in the Middle Ages,” *Studia Gratiana* 19 (1976) 126–146.

eventually to fit these voices into the new and more intricate picture of life in premodern European society that scholars are constructing.

Notwithstanding the importance of this change, it would seem, however, that some fundamental understandings of medieval life and times have not changed. Pilgrimages to shrines holding the earthly remains of saints are to this day regarded by scholars to be an important component of popular religious culture in European Middle Ages. Many of these sites were revered and were regularly visited for the curative powers associated with a particular saint. In some cases these sites served as centers of healing for the sick, the diseased, and the mentally and physically impaired.⁵ In late-antique Gaul, miracle-working was a necessary component of a cult's route to popularity, social recognition, and legitimacy.⁶ Accordingly, once such a reputation was established, individuals suffering from disease and disabilities became an inseparable part of the human landscape of these shrines. Eleventh-century sources, such as the accounts by Ralph Glaber, tell us of a reinvigorated interest in the cult of saint's relics and of their curative effects.⁷ By the later Middle Ages those individuals seeking the healing powers of the saints became associated with the saints' shrines to such an extent that they became, virtually, a cultural icon themselves! Their presence was almost inseparable from any miracle account, chronicle, or other form of documentation and artistic description of the shrines. Three examples follow:

1. In an extremely figurative painting by the Provençal painter Josse Lieferinxe, originally commissioned in 1497 by the Church of Notre-Dame-des-Accoules in Marseilles and presently on exhibit in the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica in Rome, the artist portrays handicapped and sick individuals praying and beseeching the aid of a saint at his tomb or reliquary (fig. 1).⁸

2. In one of the earliest books printed in Nürenberg that same year (1497), Jacob Issickemer chose a woodcut depicting a dismembered criminal bound to a torture wheel and a one-legged man leaning on a pair of crutches and approaching the mystically flaming image the "Lady of Altotting" to describe the site. The artist who created this woodcut decorating the short tract on the pilgrimage site of the altar of the Virgin Mary at Altotting, Bavaria, depicted the crippled man in the woodcut holding a wax image of a human leg under his armpit and presenting it to the shrine as a votive offering in the hope of curing his leg. Near the shrine one can see many other wax votive offerings in the shape of human body parts—and even entire bodies—suspended from a pole above the altar. These offerings were presented to the shrine in the hope of deliverance from sickness and disability (fig. 2).⁹

3. The boy Simon of Trent, was the alleged victim of a horrific blood libel against the Jews of that city in 1475. As part of the campaign to canonize the boy books and illustrated pamphlets were printed and widely circulated circa the events and also years later. These pam-

⁵ S. Wilson, *Saints and their Cults* (Cambridge 1985) 18–21.

⁶ R. Van-Dam, *Saints and their Miracles in Late Antique Gaul* (Princeton 1994).

⁷ Thomas Head, "The Cult of Relics in the Eleventh Century" *Medieval Hagiography: An Anthology*, ed. T. Head (New York and London 2000) 285–287.

⁸ The painting is found today in the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica in Rome. Before he was definitively identified as Josse Lieferinxe, this painter of the Provençal school was given the name "The Master of St. Sebastian."

⁹ Jacob Issickemer, *Buchlein der Zuflucht der Maria* (Nuremberg 1497); New York, Pierpont Morgan Library PML 36051. The woodcut from the book appeared in Mitchell B. Merback, *The Thief the Cross and the Wheel: Pain and Spectacle in Medieval and Renaissance Europe* (Chicago 1999) 153.

phlets presented drawings and texts describing the alleged ritual murder, martyrdom, as well as the miracles associated with Simon’s body. In one of these books that appeared in Augsburg around 1477 one of the pictures depicts Simon’s body stretched on a table, probably in the local cathedral, where his posthumous remains were presented for adoration, surrounded by the instruments of torture allegedly used for his martyrdom. To his left are votive wax donations in the shape of eyes, arms, feet and even a baby, and further to the left of the picture three pilgrims can be seen one of whom a cripple leaning on crutches.¹⁰

For several decades, modern scholars have been examining the phenomenon of pilgrimage and healing from the Christian point of view exclusively. They have tended to examine it by means of texts, paintings, and artifacts, such as the ones mentioned above, all of which stem from within the Christian sphere. I intend, in this article to discuss the reactions to the cult of saints and to the healing aspects associated with it from a hitherto unexplored angle, namely, from the Jewish point of view. I suggest that the cult of saints had a strong effect on medieval European Jewry. By looking at the Jewish sources we can hear some of those “silenced voices” of medieval European society mentioned earlier.

Jews lived alongside Christians in medieval Europe and were, in many respects, until their presence was no longer tolerated, an almost inseparable part of the human physical as well as the imagined social fabric of the medieval European community. This is especially true of the medieval urban social component, for Jews were, for the most part, city and town dwellers. Given the size of many of the medieval European towns until the late fourteenth century, Jews and Christians could not avoid being aware of their respective neighbor’s behaviors, actions, beliefs, and customs, nor could they avoid speaking about them.

Following this line of thinking, I will examine Jewish awareness of the Christian belief in the healing powers of saints and the response to it. The strong Christian adherence to this cult suggests that Jews had no choice but to react to its appeal. I believe we can point to inner Jewish mechanisms devised and designed in response to the challenge posed by the cult of saints, and the potential healing it provided. This, in turn, can serve as an analytical tool in the examination of an inner Jewish power struggle, for among certain Jews the entire notion of seeking the aid of the deceased was associated with the lower strata of society—women and children in particular—thus adding the factor of gender to our argument.

In his book *Miracles and Pilgrims*, published nearly thirty-five years ago, Ronald Finucane explored the popular attraction of the cult of saints and the process of recording by church authorities of the *vitae* as well as the posthumous miracles of saints for propaganda purposes.¹¹ In a later work Finucane described a shift in the church’s attitude during the thirteenth century, when through inquisitional tribunals the established church began to regulate more carefully the verity of accounts of miraculous

¹⁰ Die Geschichte und Legend von dem henlingen find und marterer genannt Symon, Augsburg ca. 1477.

¹¹ The socio-religious phenomenon of pilgrimage in medieval Europe has been thoroughly researched; the most recent works include J. Sumption, *The Age of Pilgrimage: The Medieval Journey to God*, (Mahwah NJ 2003); D. Webb, *Pilgrims and Pilgrimage in Medieval Europe*, (New York 1999); idem, *Medieval European Pilgrimage c. 700–c. 1500* (New York 2002). Ronald Finucane focused on the *miracula* literature that resulted from pilgrimage. This literature also served as a catalyst to broaden the phenomenon; see R. Finucane, *Miracles and Pilgrims: Popular Beliefs in Medieval England* (New York 1995).

healing attributed to saints.¹²

We should bear in mind that although, by and large, Christian efforts were aimed at converting the Jews, these propaganda efforts referred by Finucane were not primarily directed at the Jewish minority; rather, they served a Christian in-group purpose. The “public relations” campaigns undertaken by the various shrines and their respective canons, which focused on drawing sick Christians to specific shrines, served for the most part as a means of strengthening a specific cult, glorifying the saint, or enriching a particular shrine.¹³

Before going any further, I wish to state two working hypotheses and one disclaimer. First the disclaimer. The Jewish texts discussed here lead us to a much broader discussion regarding the internal Jewish development of the idea of death, the afterlife, and the final resurrection. The scope of this discussion is far greater than can be provided here. Almost a century ago, the archdeacon Robert Henry Charles cast the molds and formulated, for a modern reader, the Jewish ideas on these matters in his monumental “Eschatology,” first published in 1913.¹⁴ Although one can not speak of a clearly formulated Jewish doctrine with regard to these matters, it was generally accepted in medieval Jewish circles, at least to the extent that we can judge by what is reflected in the medieval sources, that the idea formulated in the Talmud of an afterlife and final judgment was common to medieval European Jewry. It seems that most Jews accepted the Talmudic notions expressed in various places in the vast sea of Talmudic teachings that the dead have an afterlife, and that Jews, although they are judged for their sins, are in a potentially punitive mode in the afterlife for only a relatively brief period of time (twelve months). Jewish common practices, like the recital of the mourner’s prayer *Kaddish* for eleven months, were designed for the betterment of the soul while in the punitive mode in the afterlife. With some exceptions it was also accepted that “all of Israel have their share in the world to come,” as is formulated in the Talmud tractate “Sanhedrin.”¹⁵ Thus it is no wonder that Jews beseeched the dead and asked them to intervene on their behalf. Recently Avriel Bar-Levav, in an article on cemetery typology, has pointed out the importance of the neighborhood of the dead in

¹² R. Finucane, *The Rescue of the Innocents: Endangered Children in Medieval Miracles* (New York 1997).

¹³ However, judging from the repeated use in medieval exempla of the motif of a Jew converting to Christianity after witnessing the powers of the Christian saints, no medieval European church representative would have overlooked the polemical potential of a Jew appealing to a saint for a cure. See J. Parkes, *The Conflict of Church and Synagogue: A Study in the Origins of Anti-Semitism* (New York 1981) 296–297. It was common practice among medieval preachers to cite even these somewhat “out-dated” proofs of Jews converting to Christianity in late antiquity and the early medieval times. As J. C. Young formulated the issue, “It was the habit of expression for the popular preacher to veer back and forth between citations from the Bible and contemporary conditions, and medieval sermon audiences were conditioned to accept as applicable to their own lives the lessons of moral narratives borrowed from the experience of a thousand years or more prior to their own existence”; J. Y. Gregg, *Devils Woman and Jews: Reflection of the Other in Medieval Sermon Stories* (Albany 1997) 177.

¹⁴ R. H. Charles, *Eschatology—The doctrine of the Future Life in Israel Judaism and Christianity: A Critical History*, intro. by G. W. Buchanan (New York 1963).

¹⁵ On these issues see E. E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs*, trans. I. Abrahams (Cambridge, MA 1987); J. J. Collins and M. Fishbine, *Death Ecstasy and Other Worldly Journeys* (Albany 1995); C. W. Bynum and P. Freedman, eds., *Last Things: Death and the Apocalypse in the Middle Ages*, (Philadelphia 2000).

medieval Jewish culture.¹⁶ So much for the disclaimer; I now turn to my two working hypotheses.

HYPOTHESIS 1. INTER-RELIGIOUS/CULTURAL EXCHANGE OF HEALING KNOWLEDGE: Among the learned elite and professional practitioners the existence of intercultural and interfaith exchange of medical knowledge in the European Middle Ages is a well-established fact.¹⁷ I would like to argue, however, that this phenomenon was not limited to these circles alone. Medical information was also exchanged among “commoners” on a household neighborly level as well.¹⁸ Two exempla that actually seek to limit such exchanges, and thereby testify to its existence, come from works reflecting the extremes in each society: the first exemplum is from a Jewish religious ethical work known as the *Book of the Pious* (*Sefer Hasidim*); the second comes from an English Christian monastic collection. To devout Jews like Rabbi Yehuda “the Pious” of Regensburg (d. 1217), the co-author and editor of the *Book of the Pious* and apparently a revered Jewish holy man during his lifetime and probably even more so posthumously,¹⁹ such exchanges were especially objectionable when the methods of healing involved the use of non-kosher ingredients or typically Christian folk remedies.²⁰ For their part, pious Christians objected to Jewish use of the healing powers of the saints. Both exempla date from the turn of the thirteenth century.

In the first exemplum the author praises a Jewish mother for rejecting her Christian neighbor’s offer to use a stone-chip relic from the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem to cure the Jewish woman’s dying son. From the Hebrew phrasing, it is clear that the son eventually died.²¹ I think it is safe to say that *Sefer Hasidim*’s praise for this mother frames, by way of contrast, the fact that Jews in dire need either employed Christian

¹⁶ A. Bar-Levav, “We are where we are not: the Cemetery in Jewish culture,” *Jewish Studies* 41 (2002) 15–46.

¹⁷ Scholars have been aware of this for some time, however new manuscript evidence, esp. from the 13th c., shows how deep this exchange was. See R. Barkai, *Les infortunes de Dinah: le livre de la génération: la gynécologie juive au Moyen-Age* (Paris 1991); idem, *A History of Jewish Gynecological Texts in the Middle Ages* (Leiden, Boston, and Cologne 1998); S. Kottek and L. Garcia-Ballester, eds., *Medicine and Medical Ethics in Medieval and Early Modern Spain: An Intercultural Approach* (Jerusalem 1996); J. Shatzmiller, *Jews Medicine and the Medieval Society*, (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London 1994).

¹⁸ This issue was recently discussed in E. Baumgarten, *Mothers and Children: Jewish Family Life in Medieval Europe* (Princeton 2004).

¹⁹ A large number of miraculous tales in the well-known Jewish hagiographical collection, *The Book of Tales* (*Ma’ash Buch*) are attributed to Rabbi Shmuel the Pious, Rabbi Judah’s father, and to R. Judah himself.

²⁰ The issue of using non-kosher ingredients is of particular interest since we find reference to these materials widely scattered in “professional” Hebrew manuscripts that recorded and transmitted remedies and lists of *materia medica* used by Jewish practitioners, as well as in marginal notations in Hebrew or in other Judeo languages found in rabbinical manuscripts and probably recorded by domestic non-professionals. The abundance of these references suggest that the common practice was to ignore the non-kosher aspect of these materials since they were used for a “life saving” purpose of healing the sick, known in Hebrew as “*piku’ah nefesh*.” It seems that pious circles tried to limit the size of this list to only the “bare necessities.”

²¹ After praising the mother for her resilience and rejecting the evident temptation to use a Christian faith healing method, the author parallels her behavior to the verse from Deut. 6.4–5 known in Jewish circles as the “*Shema*,” probably the closest Jewish equivalent of a creed. The verse reads: “And thou shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might.” The standard rabbinical commentary on this phrase is attributed to the 2nd-c. sage Rabbi Akivah, who interpreted this verse while he was being tortured and eventually martyred: with all your soul: even if he [God] takes your soul from you [kills you] (Babylonian Talmud, *Berachot* 61B).

relics or adopted methods of faith healing of Christian origin.

The Christian exemplum from England is in many ways the mirror image of the German–Jewish story just cited, as it describes a similar situation from a pious Christian point of view.²² In the story, a Jewish woman asks her Christian neighbor, with whom she is friendly, to stop by her inn (*hospitium*) upon her return from the shrine of St. Thomas Beckett with a bucket of holy water. The Jewess wanted the water to heal her sore leg. No sooner had the Christian neighbor crossed the threshold of the Jewish home, than the saint, angered by the blasphemous use of his healing powers by a heathen, miraculously caused the bucket to split into three parts, invoking the Trinitarian image. The water spilled out, thereby preventing either woman from using it for a potentially miraculous cure.

The very opposition expressed by these pious circles reflects a reality in which Jews and Christians alike evidently exchanged domestic medical cures. Not surprisingly, all four characters in both stories are women, for we are dealing here with the domestic side of medieval life, usually seen by medieval male authors as a woman's realm. Clearly, such exchanges existed on all levels of society and in both gender groups, though perhaps more commonly among women than among men, although the latter might be due to the male gender construct of the accounts.²³

HYPOTHESIS 2. JEWS THEMSELVES PRAYED AND POSSIBLY EVEN WENT ON PILGRIMAGE TO JEWISH GRAVESITES: This statement is not as obvious and self-evident as one would assume at first glance. An examination of Jewish medieval writing shows that this practice seems to have differed from the Christian phenomenon of visiting the shrines of deceased saints. Traditionally, Judaism viewed the earthly remains of the dead and their gravesites as impure (*teme'im*); however, this attitude was not universal. Although there is a clear preference for prayer at a pure and proper site, such as a synagogue, from the Talmudic period (late antiquity–early medieval) prayer at a cemetery was not ruled out in certain cases. From late antiquity and throughout the Middle Ages we find different notions regarding this matter. In tractate *Ta'anith* of the Babylonian Talmud, dealing with days of public fasting and prayer, we find a discussion regarding the custom of going to pray at a cemetery:²⁴

Why do they [the fasting congregation] go to the cemetery? With regard to this there is a difference of opinion between R. Levi b. Hama and R. Hanina. One says: [To signify thereby] We are as the dead before Thee; and the other says: In order that the dead should

²² J. Jacobs, *The Jews of Angevin England: Documents and Records from Latin and Hebrew Sources* (London 1893) 153.

²³ In a late 13th-c. account by Rabbi Haim Paltiel of Magdeburg, reference is made to the possible confessional errors innate to the Jewish folk practice common in his day of praying at the Jewish gravesites of deceased rabbis or martyred Jews. He says that mistaking the dead for intermediary entities is more likely to occur among those “who don't fully understand the issues”; these might be the “uneducated masses” or women. Rabbi Haim's responsa appeared in the Lemberg edition of the Responsa collection of Rabbi Meir of Rothenburg §164. A similar opinion is voiced in the SHV §669–670; SHM §709

²⁴ Prayer at a cemetery invariably involved walking a certain distance, for according to Jewish law a cemetery is always outside the city perimeter, since the tombs and human remains are deemed ritually impure.

intercede for mercy on our behalf. What is the difference between them?—The difference is with regard to going to the cemetery of Gentiles.²⁵

Furthermore we find that it is the Talmudic sages themselves who suggest that the custom of prayer at the burial sites of Jewish dignitaries, like the nation’s patriarchs, dates back to biblical times. In the Babylonian Talmud, which had strongly influenced medieval European Jewry, we find the issue discussed in tractate *Sota* 34b. The discussion there revolves around the route traveled by the Israelite reconnaissance party sent by Moses from the wilderness to explore the promised land (Num. 13.22). The rabbis suggest that by mentioning the city of Hebron in the proposed route, the biblical narrator was hinting that Caleb ben Yefuneh (a member of the reconnaissance party) had anticipated his fellow spies’ plot to discredit the land, and therefore went alone on a detour to Hebron to pray at the grave sites of the patriarchs and matriarchs so that they by their merit would deliver him from the evil counsel of his fellow reconnaissance-party members.²⁶ Although this statement should not be taken as historical evidence for any biblical practice, it does testify to the fact that Jews in late antiquity, when this statement was made, wanted to attribute their own practices to an age-old tradition.

Turning to the Middle Ages we find that although Jews were aware of these Talmudic notions, there were conflicting ideas with regard to this practice.²⁷ On the one hand, the towering figure of the twelfth century, the Jewish rationalistic philosopher Moses Maimonides, expressed a strong opinion against any such practice and even against visiting the graves of the deceased at all.²⁸ On the other hand we find in the aforementioned thirteenth-century south German *Book of the Pious* a short comment stating that the dead actually take pleasure (*hana’ah*) in the visits of the living to their gravesites and from the recitation of prayers there.²⁹

In fact, *The Book of the Pious* advocates this notion so strongly that in an exemplum associated with this teaching the author tells us about Jews who ignored the importance of this action at their own peril:

A certain community wanted to leave their city and move elsewhere. One of the dead appeared in a dream vision to one of the community members and said: Don’t leave us for we take great pleasure when you come and visit us in the graveyard and I therefore notify you that if you abandon us you will all be killed. However community members didn’t fear and weren’t mindful of this warning and they were all killed.³⁰

²⁵ Babylonian Talmud, *Ta’anith* 16a; the translation of all Talmud quotations is based on I. Epstein’s Eng. trans., *The Babylonian Talmud* (London 1938) here 74.

²⁶ Caleb was one of the two members of the reconnaissance party who did not sin by speaking ill of the land; the other member was Joshua bin Nun.

²⁷ See E. Horowitz, “Speaking to the Dead; Cemetery Prayer in Medieval and Early Modern Jewry,” *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 8 (1999) 303–317.

²⁸ His critique on this matter diverges so dramatically from the ongoing practice in his time and in later periods that we find commentators trying to harmonize his ruling, which ultimately failed, with the rituals observed in their day. The 17th-c. Maimonidean commentator Rabbi David Ben Zimrah of Cairo suggests that when Maimonides said that one should refrain from “visiting the graves” he actually meant that one should refrain from exhuming bodies. Of course this reading is hardly supported by the Hebrew phrasing in the original text.

²⁹ SHV §1537.

³⁰ SHV 269; SHM §709

As we can see from this exemplum the issue of visiting the dead and prayer at the gravesite was considered the proper thing to do, if not a religious imperative.³¹

Medieval Jewish accounts from northwestern Europe, a cultural sphere Jews commonly referred to as *Ashkenaz*, as well as from the Iberian Peninsula, known among Jews as *Sepharad*, state this with increasing clarity. Statements to this effect, especially the humbling ethical effect that prayer at a cemetery had on participants (alluded to, as we saw, in the Talmud) did not escape the eyes of medieval Jewish ethical and moral teachers.³² As we move into the late Middle Ages we find that the voices advocating prayer at gravesites grew stronger. Moreover, these voices apparently do not represent what seems to be a post-facto rabbinic approval of a popular custom, but rather a clear rabbinic call in favor of such actions. To illustrate this point, I cite two rather compelling examples, one from Iberia, and the other from the German Rhineland.

1. In the mid-fourteenth century we find the *Sephardi* Rabbi Nissim ben Reuben Gerondi (ca. 1290–1376) of Barcelona advocating prayer at the gravesites of the righteous. The source is a sermon probably delivered in public on a sabbath when the weekly portion of scriptural reading, *Beha'alotcha* (Num. 8–12), was read in the synagogue—most likely in his native Barcelona. The sermon was later edited by Rabbi Nissim himself. In the biblical portion, Moses's chaste behavior is contested by his siblings Aaron and Miriam, but subsequently receives greater praise from the Lord. This biblical scene served as a springboard for Rabbi Nissim to discuss the issue of prophecy and the qualities of the prophets. It is in this context that the issue of praying at gravesites is discussed. Rabbi Nissim stated that the divine qualities bestowed upon a human as a prophet during his lifetime do not cease to exist with his death. On the contrary, as the body of the prophet was once a vessel for the divine presence, its earthly remains retain these qualities posthumously.³³ Rabbi Nissim concludes his discussion of this topic with the following remark: "Prayer in that place will be more favorably received as that is where the bodies, on which the divine spirit had rested, are found."³⁴ Interestingly enough it seems Rabbi Nissim was unaware of Rabbi Judah's ideas on this issue and probably arrived at these conclusions independently.

2. The students of the late fourteenth–early fifteenth-century German rabbi Jacob ben Moses Halevi Moellin, a prominent Jewish leader in Mainz, better known by his

³¹ It should be noted that the *Book of the Pious*, although strongly embedded in medieval central European Jewish as well as non-Jewish culture, is thought to represent a rather elitist almost sectarian circle of pious Jews, at least as far as the ethical agenda it advocates. We will see how some of these notions gain greater popularity during the course of time.

³² See Avriel Bar-Levav (n. 16 above).

³³ "Since the prophets and the most pious in those generations past were bestowed with divine grace and through them it was conferred upon those at their time who were ready to receive it, especially those who beseeched their presence and those partaking with them, therefore not in their lives alone did this grace exist but also after their death; the sites of their burial are to be the places where this grace can be found in some aspects. For their bones who were already once vessels for this grace still have within them the quality and the honor that would be sufficient for such a capacity. And this is the way our sages, may their memory be blessed, thought it worthy to prostrate themselves on the graves of the righteous and pray there, for the prayer at that site is very fitting since it is the place where bodies upon which the divine plenitude has already rested, are found" (my trans.).

³⁴ A. L. Feldman, *Derashot HaRaN HaShalem (The Sermons of Rabbenu Nissim)* (Jerusalem 2003) 296. I wish to thank Prof. Yehuda Galinsky for bringing this source to my attention and discussing it with me.

acronym MaHaRIL, reported that he said the following:

... the cemetery is the resting place of the righteous. Therefore it is a holy and ritually pure place and prayer is most acceptable on holy soil. [However], those who prostrate themselves on the tombs of the righteous and pray should not focus on the dead person's body lying there but should rather beseech God, blessed be he, for mercy based on the spiritual merits of the righteous dead who lie in the earth, may their souls be bound in the bond of life.³⁵

This quotation cites the merits of the righteous dead as a rationale for praying at the cemetery; at the same time, however, it highlights, by way of contrast, the exact focus of the prayer—namely, the almighty himself stressing that one should not err to believe the righteous serve as intermediaries. From this source it is also clear that in MaHaRIL's time the practice was well known and probably quite common. It appears that there were objections raised concerning the purity of the cemetery as a proper place and focus for prayer. However, it seems these objections were “ironed out” by MaHaRIL's ruling.

These two sources imply that what was a popular religious but as yet officially unrecognized custom in the earlier Middle Ages became a properly constructed and rabbinically certified—even advocated—practice.³⁶ However this notion that prayer by the graves is of special merit did not emerge uncontested. We hear criticism of these views among medieval Jews, based on fear, in certain rabbinic circles, that the practice of prayer by the graves will in fact be misunderstood and that wrong things will be said and believed. Even in MaHaRIL's positive account of the practice his choice of words suggests that he was aware of possible errors and was familiar with the critique. A careful examination of the critical voices reveals what seems to be a gender based difference:

1. The first critical voice is that of the late thirteenth-century German Rabbi Hayim Paltiel of Magdeburg. Rabbi Hayim feared that unlearned circles in Jewish society—in other words, women—might misinterpret the reason of prayer at the gravesites, and he therefore opposed their praying there altogether.³⁷

2. A later and more explicit criticism is found in the response of Rabbi Moses Mintz, a late fifteenth-century sage (d. 1483) who migrated from Germany to Italy and finally to Poland. In a response regarding a votive vow to go on pilgrimage either to a family gravesite or to the “graves of the holy and righteous,” he comments: “... there are quite a few great ones who have objected to this practice and have labeled it ‘necromancy’ (Deut. 18.11), for most of the unlearned folks and women beseech the dead as mediators between them and their maker blessed be he.” Although this

³⁵ S. Spitzer, ed., *Sefer MaHaRIL-Minhagim (The Book of MaHaRIL: The Customs)* (Jerusalem 1989) 270. Note the nuanced remark in MaHaRIL's ruling that one who prays at a cemetery and beseeches the lord there must ensure that he directs his prayers and efforts directly to God and not err by considering the righteous dead buried there to be the mediators between him and the divine. Rather the person praying should reflect and contemplate the righteous deeds and merits of the dead and include it in his prayer.

³⁶ Avriel Bar-Levav believes that no distinction should be made here between a popular custom and the eventual rabbinic embrace. In his article on the typology of the Jewish cemetery he tends to blur these distinctions and favor a model of alternating opinions among different rabbis in different time periods with regard to the visiting grave sites and prayer there; see “We are Where We Are Not” (n. 16 above) 15–46.

³⁷ Rabbi Hayim's critique is found in his illustrious contemporary Rabbi Meir of Rothenberg's responsa collection Meir b. Baruch of Rotenberg, *Responsa* (Lemberg 1860) §164.

criticism testifies to the fact that the practice had become rather common, it might also explain the small number of accounts of actual pilgrimages to specific Jewish gravesites in medieval Europe.

It should be noted that in Hebrew accounts of pilgrimage trips to the Holy Land medieval Jews did not express similar concerns to the ones voiced here by Rabbi Hayim and Rabbi Mintz when recounting their visits to the gravesites of prophets and famous rabbis.³⁸ The critique does however surface specifically with regard to prayer and pilgrimage to “local” gravesites. This brings us to two fundamental questions: where were the Jewish pilgrimage sites in medieval Europe, and who were those “righteous ones” at whose gravesites Rabbi Mintz feared the unlearned would be so gravely mistaken as to think of them as mediators between the pilgrim and the divine?

It seems that prior to the fifteenth century we know of virtually no Jewish dignitary whose gravesite in Europe was the focus of pilgrimage. There is, however, fragmented evidence of such pilgrimage that appears in Jewish rabbinic literature with reference to a specific sight of possible pilgrimage. In an early fifteenth-century response collection, the Jewish cemetery in Regensburg is mentioned in this context. In the response to R. Elchanan (Chonlyn) Katz, the aforementioned MaHaRIL tells us that R. Chonlyn’s wife vowed to go on pilgrimage to the grave site of the “holy ones” (*Ha’quedoshim*) in Regensburg.³⁹ Elchanan Reiner has argued that these might be the graves of Rabbi Judah “the Pious” and his family members, who lived and might have been buried in the city. In a document from the late fifteenth-century we do find that the grave of Rabbi Judah “the Pious” in Regensburg was in fact a specific destination of pilgrimages.⁴⁰ It is not altogether unlikely that this site was visited by Jewish pilgrims earlier in the Middle Ages. Other sites of possible inter-European Jewish pilgrimage were the mass burial sites found in the three important Jewish communities in the Rhineland: Speyer, Worms, and Mainz (usually referred to in Jewish medieval texts by their Hebrew acronym SHUM). An account from the fourth decade of the fifteenth century tells us of a wealthy Augsburgian Jew, called Lemlyn, who vowed to visit “the deceased in the SHUM communities” (*Nochei Hanepesh she’bequehilot SHUM*).⁴¹

³⁸ Elchanan Reiner, “Traditions of Holy Places in Medieval Palestine: Oral versus Written,” *Offerings from Jerusalem—Portrayals of Holy Places by Jewish Artists*, ed. Rachel Sarfati et al. (Jerusalem 2002) 9–19.

³⁹ Y. Satz, ed., *She’elot U’Teshuvot MaHaRIL* (Jerusalem 1980) §118, p. 214. Rabbi Judah and his father Rabbi Shmuel b. Kalonymus “the Pious” of Speyer were probably known during their lives but definitely posthumously as almost saintly figures, and there are many hagiographical accounts that mention their names as mystics and miracle-workers. One of the largest hagiographical accounts connected to their names that probably circulated orally in Judeo-German (Yiddish) for quite some time before being printed is found in the Yiddish hagiographical collection known as the *Ma’ase Buch*. This collection was printed in Basel in 1602. A fine Eng. trans. is M. Gaster, trans., *Ma’aseh Book: Book of the Jewish Tales and Legends I–II* (Philadelphia 1934).

⁴⁰ In a 15th-c. chronicle by Rabbi Menachem of Olenndorf, the author states that he went on pilgrimage to the grave of Judah the Pious in Regensburg on the Ninth of Av 1472, and even signed his name on the epitaph. See I. M. Ta-Shma, “A New Chronography on the 13th-Century Tosaphists,” *Shalem* 3 (1981) 318–324.

⁴¹ The account is found in the 15th-c. compendium *Leket Yosher* by Rabbi Joseph b. Moshe (ed. J. Freiman [Berlin 1903] [Hebrew] 2.25). The questioner referred to in the account is Rabbi Jacob b. Yehuda Weil. Rabbi Joseph was the close disciple of Rabbi Jacob Weil and he refers to the case as his own recollection. Rabbi Jacob Weil had been the Augsburg Rabbi (Hochmeister) for ten years, from 1429 until the

Interestingly, while most, if not all, the Jews traveling to Palestine on pilgrimage from Europe during the Middle Ages were men, both the critical and positive accounts of pilgrimage to European Jewish sites mention only (or mostly) women and the unlearned. We may, therefore, assume that prayer at gravesites not of the pilgrim’s immediate family or close kin was associated mainly with women. This assumption may explain the aforementioned critique, namely, the attempt to regulate the prayers recited at gravesites (to be addressed below), and the almost total absence of this practice from rabbinic literature. Another possible suggestion is that pilgrimages of this type were not carried out by individuals, but might have been part of a rabbinically led and tightly supervised local public congregational phenomenon, as indicated by several sources.⁴² It would also seem that this practice blossomed into full-fledged pilgrimage to gravesites of European Jewish dignitaries only in the late middle ages.

I want now take a closer look at Jewish thinking about the cult of relics, pilgrimage and prayer at shrines dedicated to saints, and the belief that miraculous healing occurs at these sites. As noted, the high visibility of this cult and its centrality in everyday life in medieval cities and towns meant that Jews could neither overlook nor entirely ignore this religious-cultural component. Featured in Jewish anti-Christian polemic literature, it was one of the main issues raised in informal as well as formal Jewish anti-Christian polemics. From the Jewish sources we gain the impression that time and again Jews were asked by their neighbors about their (the Jews) refusal to acknowledge the cult of saints, and especially their unwillingness to admit the miraculous healing powers attributed to saints as intermediaries. It is important to note that like many religiously polemical texts, the Jewish anti-Christian polemics, especially those written in Hebrew, although assuming the role of manuals designed to serve the polemist, actually served a different function. These manuals were primarily aimed at members of the inner group of Jews who produced these very same manuals and much less at their Christian neighbors. The authors of Jewish polemic literature wished to voice arguments against the cult, rationalizing a decision not to go to the shrines of healing. This move originated from an awareness of a possible Jewish tendency to contemplate the healing of the saints, especially in times of dire need,

local Jews were expelled from their city by the local city council’s decree in 1440. We know Rabbi Jacob Weil left the city in 1439. Since the respondent is referred to as an Augsburgian Jew, one may assume that the account refers to this decade. The account does not tell us whether the gravesites in question were those of Lemlyn’s ancestors, famous rabbis from SHU”M, or what seems more likely to me, the gravesites of the 1096 riot martyrs. What is interesting about the account is the reason we come to hear of the whole matter. Lemlyn appealed to the local Rabbinic authority R. Jacob Weil (?1385–?1455) because he was losing his eyesight and wished to annul his vow and exchange it for a charitable donation. Lemlyn even expresses skepticism as to whether he can fulfill the vow with the aid of someone to guide him on his way (*Ta-yar*=guide). Had this been a Christian vowing to go on pilgrimage, the fact that he was losing his eyesight might have served as stronger incentive to go on pilgrimage in the hope of deliverance from this ailment. It appears that this thought did not even cross Lemlyn’s mind. The account concludes with Rabbi Jacob Weil agreeing to exchange the vow for a large sum of money that was used to help a poor local girl marry, and to sustain a few poor families in the community.

⁴² SHV §669.

such as illness. In these cases one's piety couldn't be taken for granted. To demonstrate this point, I consider three examples from three different polemical works of medieval Jewish Western Europe.

1. *Sefer Nizzahon Yashan*, known also by its Latin name *Nizzahon Vetus* (NV) is a well known book of Jewish anti-Christian polemic. The Hebrew word *Nizzahon* found in the title means both victory and argument and debate. Preserved in a single manuscript in the University Library of Strasburg, this work was first printed in 1681 by Johann Christoph Wagenseil (1633–1705), a German historian and Hebraist, in his *Tela Ignea Satanae* (*The Fiery Arrows of the Devil*).⁴³ In the late 1970s David Berger published an invaluable bilingual annotated edition of the full text based on all the known sources.

Compiled in the thirteenth century by an anonymous author, NV collected extant classical Jewish counter-arguments and commented on pressing contemporary polemic matters in the Franco-German sphere. Structured on the order of the Hebrew Bible, and focused on the verses that form the core of contention in the Jewish-Christian controversy, NV was a handy manual for Jews confronted with Christian polemic. The second section of the book contains a broad critique of the Gospel and of common Christian beliefs and customs, including the cult of saints. In §203 the author discredits and ridicules saintly miracles:

It is also written in their books: "Anyone who believes in Jesus even like a seed of millet can move a mountain with his speech" [Matt. 17.20]. We see, however, that even their saints cannot do this, and surely not the rest of the people ...⁴⁴

However, this does not fully represent the author's view on the issue. In a later section (§240), in which he speaks out against visiting holy Christian gravesites, we find a somewhat different approach.⁴⁵ The author first argues that the remains of the dead, righteous or ordinary, convey impurity. For this reason, and also fearing that humans would err, the graves of the truly righteous figures in the Bible, such as Moses, were concealed. The faulty nature of this reasoning was apparent even to the author, for he was well aware of the fact that some purported gravesites of righteous biblical figures were well known even in his day and a source for visit and prayer. Almost certainly anticipating such a claim, the author states that the unconcealed gravesites are nonetheless inaccessible, pointing to the crypts in the Cave of the Patriarchs at Hebron in the Holy-Land as an example. He states that "no nation can enter there," because of the impurity of the dead.⁴⁶

⁴³ J. C. Wagenseil, *Tela Ignea Satanae hoc est arcane et horribiles Judaeorum adversus Christum, Deum et Christianam Religionem Libri* (Altdorf 1681).

⁴⁴ D. Berger, *The Jewish Christian Polemics in the High Middle Ages: A Critical Edition of the Nizzahon Vetus with an introduction translation and commentary* (Philadelphia 1979) Berger NV §203, Eng. p. 202.

⁴⁵ Berger NV §240, Eng. p.225

⁴⁶ Regarding this issue, see E. Reiner, "Overt Falsehood and Covert Truth: Christians Jews and Holy Places in Twelfth-Century Palestine," *Zion* 63 (1998) 157–188 (Hebrew). Although E. Reiner had meticulously reviewed most of the known Hebrew and Jewish material on this issue, he might have overlooked this note by NV. This bit of information might actually help us track the origins of NV, or at least the sources used by the author when compiling this polemical compendium. A Jewish traveler of the early 13th-c. wrote a short account of his travels in the Holy Land in 1211. In this account published decades ago by A. Ya'ari, *Igrot Me'Eretz Yisrael* (Ramat-Gan 1971)75–83, the traveler makes a note of many of the various shrines of

The longest and most elaborate reckoning with the cult of saints and the healing powers attributed to them appears in NV §217. This text deserves a much more thorough treatment than this article allows; I will, therefore, limit my analysis of the text to my main line of argument, where the author deals directly with Christian claims that saints can heal and that diseases and ailments are cured as a result of pilgrimage to, and prayer at, shrines. In support of his argument the author first cites Psalm 88.11 rejecting the possibility that miracles are performed for the sake of the dead (“Will you perform wonders for the dead? Shall the dead arise and praise you? Selah”). This also shows “that there is no praise and prayer except by the living.” I believe this short remark is important and I shall return to it in my concluding argument. After having made this point the author goes on to address the Christian notion that the saints act as human-divine intermediaries and that God performs miracles on their behalf in their shrines, posthumously, through their earthly remains. Surprisingly enough, the Christian claim that miracles actually occur is not altogether discredited. As we shall see this line of argument quite frequently appears in Jewish polemics on this point. Later on in the paragraph the author continues this line of thought; he again acknowledges the verity of miracles that take place at shrines; they are, however, in his mind deliberately designed to mislead the Christians, and to mire them more deeply in their erroneous path:

The fact remains that saint so-and-so does remarkable deeds such as curing the blind, strengthening the weak, and freeing the imprisoned. This is how you should answer him [the Christian]: ... a sickness has a specific time allotted to it, and it is faithful; it will not endure past its time and give the lie to its faithfulness even if it turns out that the sick man will be cured when he goes to some idolatrous practice ... He may then ask: Why didn't the end of the disease come before he came to the saint? Why is it that he was cured at the very moment that he came to the saint? Answer him: This is done to mislead you as Job said, “He misleads nations and destroys them, he spreads out for the nations and leads them [Job 12.23], i.e., he spreads out a trap and leads them into it to be caught. Moreover, Isaiah said, “I am sought by them that asked not for me; I am found by them that sought me not. I said behold me, to a nation that was not called by my name. I spread out my hands all day unto a rebellious people which walks in the way that is not good, after their own thoughts ... who eat swine's flesh ...” [Isa. 65.1–4].⁴⁷

The author here also makes use of the verse in Isaiah 65 to prove that those who receive a cure from God are not necessarily beseeching him in the proper manner, but approach him through the false mediation of dead saints.

2. NV is by no means the only Jewish polemic composition to deal with these is-

the biblical and later righteous figures whose graves he visited in the Holy Land. In his description of the cave of the patriarchs in Hebron he mentions that Jews were banned from entering. However even the local Muslims, at the time in control of the land after the Ayubi conquest of 1187, could not enter the cave, for it was very narrow. This description corroborates NV author's knowledge of the same site. The traveler's account appears in several medieval Jewish manuscripts, which would suggest the account circulated in medieval Western Europe and was known in the 13th c. One such account appears in an early 13th-c. MS: in MS Parma Bibliotheca Palatina 2295, fol. 119, the scribe discloses the fact that he had found the travel account and thought it worthy of copying. From the names mentioned in the MS, both the scribe's and the author of the travel account, it is clear that they lived in the first half of 13th c. This would suggest that NV's author, who had similar knowledge, might be from the same period or at least used sources from this period in his compendium.

sues. Our second example comes from *The Book of Joseph the Zealous* (*Sefer Joseph Ha'Mekaneh*)⁴⁸. The author of this work, Joseph ben Nathan Official, was a high-ranking financial advisor and banker who mingled with the upper echelon of the French ecclesiastical establishment during the second half of the thirteenth century. Both Joseph and his father Nathan, who held a similar office, held religious debates with prominent clergymen on what seems to be an occasional basis. Some of these actual or imaginary debates were summed up in the above mentioned book. Regarding the cult of saints and the belief in their healing powers, the Jewish polemist focuses on a story that circulated during his father Nathan's lifetime. There is very little in the way of evidence in the Hebrew text to suggest precisely which event is related; the Hebrew text only states that the alleged dead saint came from Pons.⁴⁹ In that town a certain body (perhaps even the purported victim of an anti-Jewish blood libel) was reported to have manifested saintly qualities by working healing miracles and was therefore either believed to be a saint by contemporaries or was actually canonized:

During the libel (*alilot*) in Pons the gentiles came and told the bishops of Poitiers and Angouleme⁵⁰ that the saint⁵¹ was working miracles, curing the blind, healing the crippled, and opening the mouths of the dumb. Rabbi Nathan said to them: All this I believe, for the Holy One Blessed be He is used to working miracles for those of little faith, for it is written: "I am sought by them that asked not for me; I am found by them that sought me not. I said behold me, to a nation that was not called by my name. I spread out my hands all day unto a rebellious people that walk in the way that is not good after their own thoughts [Isa. 65.1]."

As in the case of the NV text, the passage in Joseph's book referring to events in his father's time clearly states that the healing miracles that take place at the shrine or that are attributed to the dead saint's body are actual miracles; however, they are designed by God to mislead the Christians. Here again as in NV the verse from Isaiah 65 is

⁴⁷ Berger, NV §217, Eng. p. 210–211.

⁴⁸ Joseph b. Nathan Official, *Yosef Ha'mekaneh*, ed. J. Rosenthal (Jerusalem 1970).

⁴⁹ Prof. William C. Jordan pointed out to me that the name Pons (Latin) is usually the first or last component of a longer word or phrase if it occurs in a place name: Pont-sur-X, Pont-X, or less often X-pont, in French. Thus, one encounters Pont-sur-Yonne, Pontoise, and Vieuxpont, among hundreds of other place names. The corpse mentioned in this text might be Little St. Richard of Pontoise (Richard of Paris). In 1179 St. Richard of Pontoise was allegedly murdered ritually by Jews of Pontoise (Paris). The much later passion of St. Richard, by Robert Gaguin (1498), was printed in the *Acta Sanctorum* for 25 March (vol. 3, March 591). It speaks of the slaying of a Christian as an annual custom, and has Richard—about whose identity and parentage nothing is said—examined in a cave by a priest of the Jews and asked to deny his faith. He is crucified and quotes Scripture on the cross. The result of the martyrdom was the persecution of the Jews by Philip II Augustus and the subsequent canonization of the boy as St. Richard. In the late 12th c. the body of St. Richard was presented in the Church of the Holy Innocents in Paris.

⁵⁰ Judah Rosenthal, the editor of the critical edition of *The Book of Joseph the Zealous*, points to the Bishop Johannes de Melun as the relevant Bishop of Poitiers at the time of this account (1235–1257); see also H. Gross, *Galia Judaica: Dictionnaire Géographique de la France d'après les Sources Rabbiniques* (Amsterdam 1969) 62, 445, 452–453.

⁵¹ The Hebrew account that refers to the saint uses the Hebrew biblical word *Seketz* (fowl and impure being). This language is typical of Jewish polemical accounts of the Middle Ages discussing things that Christians held sacred. See A. Sapir-Abulafia, "Invectives against Christianity in the Hebrew Chronicles of the First Crusade, *Crusade and Settlement*, ed. P. Edbury (Cardiff 1985) 66–72; E. Horowitz, "Medieval Jews Face the Cross," *The Persecutions of 1096 in History and Historiography*, ed. Y. T. Assis et al. (Jerusalem 2000) 118–140 (in Hebrew).

cited to support this interpretation. The Christians are depicted in the text as having little faith and therefore in need of constant miracle working.

3. The third and final example comes from another anonymous Jewish anti-Christian tract called *The Book of Debate: A Rebuke of the Minim* (*Minim* was the Hebrew code word for Christians used from as early as the second century C.E.; its literal meaning is “heretics”). On the basis of its paleography, one may assume that this short, never-published medieval Hebrew polemic tract may be dated no earlier than the fifteenth century [Oxford, Bodleian Library 2289 fols. 30–58]. The manuscript is itself somewhat of a riddle. Most of the material found in it is of a rather eclectic nature, but it echoes medieval Jewish rabbinic material; some of the materials, including the polemic tract, have much in common with the writings typical of the circle of *Hasidei Ashkenaz* (the Jewish Pietists of medieval Germany).⁵² The material is recorded in Hebrew and written in a standard European scribal Hebrew font, and although it is dated no earlier than the fifteenth century, large portions of the textual material in the manuscript date back to the thirteenth century, and most of the material is even earlier. Textual evidence from the polemical tractate under discussion even suggests that the specific text in question was either first drawn up in the late twelfth or early thirteenth century or compiled later using early thirteenth century materials and argumentation. The reason for this detailed discussion of the precise dates rests on the fact that some of the arguments relating to Christianity appear to have been constructed while Latin Europe was still under the traumatic impression of the fall of Jerusalem and the Holy Sepulcher to the hands of Saladin (1187) and the futile attempts to recapture it during the Third Crusade.⁵³ The polemist compares the Holy Sepulcher’s inability to counter the Muslims’ offensive with the evident triumph of the Ark of the Covenant in the biblical story of its capture by the Philistines in 1 Sam. 5, highlighting the devastation the Ark brought on the Philistines’ temple when presented as a trophy for the God Dagon. In this spirit, the polemist goes so far as to make a powerful *a fortiori*: While the Ark of the Covenant, containing only objects constructed by divine ordinance (the Mosaic tablets or their fragments), could miraculously protect itself from the Philistine infidels, the Sepulcher of Jesus, which according to Christians contained, at least for some time, the remains of the deity himself, was unable to protect itself from the hands of the Muslim infidel and prevent its subsequent fall into Muslim hands in 1187.

Among the many anti-Christian arguments set forth in this work are claims concerning the alleged healing powers of the Christian saints. In his argument the Jewish polemist, like the ones mentioned earlier, acknowledges again the authenticity

⁵² On this group and its leaders, including the aforementioned Rabbi Yehudah the Pious, see chiefly I. G. Marcus, *Piety and Society: The Jewish Pietists of Medieval Germany* (Leiden 1981); and H. Soloveitchik, “Piety, Pietism and German Pietism: *Sefer Hasidim* and the Influence of *Hasidei Ashkenaz*,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 92 (2002) 455–493.

⁵³ I thank Prof. Yisrael Ya’akov Yuval for turning my attention to this manuscript. On the liturgical resonance of the trauma of the loss of Latin Jerusalem to the forces of Saladin and the inability to recapture Jerusalem, see Amnon Linder, “Deus Venerunt Gentes: Psalm 78 (79) in the Liturgical Commemoration of the Destruction of Latin Jerusalem,” *Bar-Ilan Studies in History* 4 (1995) 145–171; and idem, “Jews and Judaism in the Eyes of Christian Thinkers in the Middle Ages: The Destruction of Jerusalem in Medieval

of the miraculous cures that take place at the shrines of the saints; however, he attributes them to “the creator” and not to the healing power of the saints, accusing Christians of misleading innocent believers into thinking that the saints are responsible for the healing.

And if the gentile asks you: why doesn't the Creator work miracles on the Jews' behalf as he does for us Christians, proving his claim from their saints where the lame and the blind and the dumb go and are healed ... and he says to you: what cured the lame and the blind and the dumb? Answer him: All God's loved ones are cured when the time comes, as Scripture says: “from bad and faithful illness [you deliver us].” What is faithful about illnesses? They are faithful in their mission, for when the time comes they leave. And when the gentiles go to their churches and shrines they think that the miracle is on account of the saints, and that is not so, for the creator has done it, as Scripture says: “He misleads nations and destroys them” [Job 12.23].

This argument by the Jewish anonymous polemist uses similar arguments and the same biblical verses [Job 12.23] cited in the sources discussed earlier, but with a different twist. Although the healing of the Christian is authentic, and although it appears to be through the mediation of the saint, this is all an “optical illusion.” The illness would have terminated anyway regardless of the appeal to the saint since illness itself is a faithful servant of the “Creator” and it disappears when the “Creator” wills it, even when one errs in this matter and ascribes the healing to the saint and the visit to his shrine.

From what we have seen so far, it seems that the healing miracles reported to have taken place at the shrines of saints posed a considerable challenge to Jewish polemist, especially in more popular and less philosophically and scholarly constructed arguments. These were probably typical of what historians of Jewish-Christian polemics would call “street corner polemics” between Jewish and Christian acquaintances.⁵⁴

The examples I have cited clearly attest to the fact that healing saints and their shrines were an extremely powerful image in medieval European culture, and they served as a constant reminder to the Jews that their faith was being constantly challenged on the issue of healing saints not only on an scholarly intellectual basis but also on a day to day basis. Jews could therefore not entirely disregard this extremely powerful image and could not fight against the “reality” and “validity” of the miracles that took place and were recorded and apparently also discussed by folks in the

Christian Liturgy,” *From Witness to Witchcraft: Jews and Judaism in Medieval Christian Thought*, ed. J. Cohen (Wiesbaden 1996) 113–123.

⁵⁴ This form of polemic was checked by both Jewish and Christian authors on both sides for fear of the outcome; we hear that both Jews and Christians were repeatedly asked to refrain from doing this. The objection serves as strong proof that it did occur, apparently quite frequently. Ora Limor has written quite extensively on this subject: O. Limor, “Missionary Merchants; Three Medieval Anti-Jewish Works from Genoa,” *Journal of Medieval History* 17 (1991) 35–51 ; eadem, “Beyond Barcelona” *Jewish History* 9 (1995) 107–119; O. Limor and Y. Y. Yuval, “Skepticism and Conversion; Jews, Christians, and Doubters in “Sefer ha-Nizzahon,” *Hebraica Veritas? Christian Hebraists and the Study of Judaism in Early Modern Europe*, ed. A. P. Coudert and J. S. Shoulson (Philadelphia 2004) 159–180.

medieval environment. The Jewish polemical response had to find a way to deal with the “fact” of miraculous healing and it chose to analyze the outcome from a different religious outlook altogether. However, from the Jewish response it is also clear that Jews were truly troubled (from an intra-group point of view) by the strong Christian advocacy for the healing provided by the saints and their shrines. Did medieval European Jewry devise a protocol for balancing what seems to be the appeal and success of the shrines of healing saints ?

In light of the foregoing, I want to reexamine two other phenomena that may be informative. I have already hinted at the first of these namely, the rise of rabbinic support for the halakhically questionable practice of pilgrimage to, and prayer at, the gravesites of prominent people and Jewish martyrs, which eventually received what seems to be full rabbinic support in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. It is my belief that the strong appeal of the healing shrines contributed to this phenomenon. However this case requires more evidence than what has been presented so far.

Previously, we have seen Jewish early fifteenth-century rabbis, such as MaHaRIL, who supported the practice of prayer at gravesites as long as the appropriate method of prayer was observed. But how could that “appropriate method” be achieved? MaHaRIL was, of course, not alone in his ruling, as his own mentor and older contemporary, the Austrian Rabbi Shalom of Neustadt (d. 1413) discussed this issue as well.

Rabbi Shalom who had lived in Vienna and then moved to the Austrian town of (Wiener)Neustadt was considered by his contemporaries as well as by modern scholars of rabbinics, to be (along with his famous disciple MaHaRIL) the dominant figure in the consolidation of Ashkenazi rites and customs known in Hebrew as *Minhag Ashkenz*. The aftermath of the Black Death and the anti-Jewish riots that accompanied it served as a catalyst in these endeavors. A short reference in a book of religious customs (*minhagim*) attributed to Rabbi Shalom, and actually compiled and edited by his disciples in the early fifteenth century, he is reported to have commented on the matter we are discussing . In his discussion he invokes the Talmudic allusion of the image of the biblical Caleb, previously mentioned, to prove that prayer at a relative’s grave is worthy and effective.

A teaching from the *Haver Lemel* who has heard from his brother Rabbi Rebl who heard it from Rabbi Meir b. Baruch of Fulda the Levite⁵⁵ of blessed memory: He who goes to visit the tombs of the dead recites this prayer: “May it be the will of God that this person laying buried here will rest in dignity.” From Rabbi Shalom [of Neustadt] I heard that he who goes to visit the tombs of the dead should recite this prayer: “May it be the will of God that this person laying buried here will rest in dignity and his merit will be transmitted to me.” And he [Rabbi Shalom] said that *Rokeah* [Rabbi Eliezer b. Judah of Worms (d. 1235)] wrote that the soul ascends to the heaven. For during the time of death one is sworn not to tell what

⁵⁵ This German rabbi, a contemporary of Rabbi Shalom and a onetime resident of Vienna, should not be confused with the late 13th-c. Jewish sage and super communal leader Rabbi Meir b. Baruch of Rothenberg (d. 1293).

she [the soul] has come to know as it is written: “every tongue shall swear” (Isa. 45.23) so that it would not enclose secrets and tell things to the relatives of the deceased, however the *Mind* (*Ha'da'at*) and the *Spirit* (*Ha'ru'ach*) stay along side the body. And that is why Caleb went to prostrate himself upon the Patriarch's tombs ...⁵⁶

This revealing passage is, virtually, a textual archeological site, as it provides a cross section of the developments in medieval European, Jewish reactions to the issue of prayer at gravesites, and the striking similarity between it and the Christian practice. In it we find how Jewish thought unfolds over a century and a half: from the late twelfth century—the time of *Rokeah* (Rabbi Eliezer b. Judah of Worms), whose teachings are mentioned in the passage—to the early fifteenth century—the time of Rabbi Shalom of Neustadt in whose writing it appears. It seems that MaHaRIL's ruling (mentioned earlier) was part of a wider attempt in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century to regulate the prayers recited while visiting a gravesite, by introducing a more nuanced approach. Due to the growing number of people who actually practiced this custom and the rabbinical attempt to regulate rather than oppose what seems to be a stream of popular piety, we see evidence of the regulatory process.

Regulation is, in part, a product of a “benevolent effort,” that is, an attempt to help the less learned and the less eloquent formulate their feeling so they can achieve the most from this encounter. However, regulation is also an attempt to exercise power, to control, at least, what is uttered in these situations. The fear that the unlearned, less eloquent, masses may say things that are not doctrinally tenable demanded that the learned elite formulate and regulate the words recited on such occasions. We recall that Jewish thirteenth-century sources are ever watchful with the possible problematic outcome of encounters based on the similarity with Christian practice and doctrine. However later medieval rabbis seem to have preferred the lesser of two evils, that is, regulating a popular custom rather than fighting what seems to be a lost battle.

Rabbi Shalom's book on Jewish customs quoted a statement attributed to the early thirteenth-century sage Rabbi Eliezer b. Judah known as *Rokeah*.⁵⁷ *Rokeah* was a close member of the inner circle of the above-mentioned elitist group of Jewish pietists in medieval Germany. Ivan Marcus has shown that Rabbi Eliezer *Rokeah* was among the less disillusioned and more inclusive in a line of pietist thinkers trying to square a pietist agenda with a larger body of adherents.⁵⁸ In his statement quoted above *Rokeah* tried to explain what it is that draws people to pray at gravesites. He rejects the possibility of divination, subtly rebuking what he sees as the essence of the Christian practice. In his reasoning the *neschama* (soul), the only part of the human being that has divine knowledge, leaves the body at the moment of death and is therefore no longer present in the body posthumously. Though this view, in effect, renders all attempts at necromancy or divination futile, it does however beg the question: what it is that one

⁵⁶ S. J. Spitzer, *Decisions and Customs of Rabbi Shalom of Neustadt* (Jerusalem 1997) 160, § 490.

⁵⁷ The Hebrew word *Rokeah* literally means “the apothecary” in its medieval sense of blending together ingredients to form a potion. R. Eliezer b. Judah of Worms assumed this name after he called his opus magnum written in the first decades of the 13th c. “*Ma'ase Rokeah*,” namely, “the deed of the apothecary.” The work put together various traditions and tried to create an all-encompassing manual for Jewish traditional life.

⁵⁸ Marcus, *Piety and Society* (n. 52 above) 109–135.

should look for in the earthly remains. Some aspects of the psyche, Rokeah is quoted as having said, remain present in the body’s close proximity in life as well as after death—the *da’at* (mind) and the *ruach* (spirit). It is, therefore, plausible to beseech the dead and pray at their graves. This notion is not Rabbi Eliezer’s innovation, it appears explicitly in the teachings of his master Rabbi Yehudah “the Pious,” first formulated in this manner in the aforementioned *Book of the Pious* (*Sefer Hasidim*) where the author clearly states: “the spirit still dwells in one’s bodily remains although it [the body] has already been reduced to the dirt of the earth.”⁵⁹

What was once, in the thirteenth century, part of the pietistic-elitist teaching of a small circle of adherents, seems to have become, a century and a half later either common belief among larger circles in the medieval Ashkenazi community, or, perhaps, these notions had been popular all along and only surface in writing later. Although it is difficult to make conclusive distinctions in this case, either way, by the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century it was commonly believed that some spiritual aspects of the deceased live on in the presence of the earthly remains. In my view, this change in attitude toward the earthly remains of the dead and the possibility of prayer at these sites cannot be understood without the influence of the strong appeal of the cult of saints and the shrines of healing.

Turning to the second issue, I look at a healing practice recorded in two sources from Jewish pietistic circles in the Franco-German region. In his *Book of the Fearful* (*Sefer Yereim*), the late-twelfth-century sage Rabbi Eliezer of Metz discusses the legal boundaries of the commandment from Deuteronomy forbidding necromancy. In the discussion he states the following:

And he who turns to a dying man and makes him swear to appear after his death to answer his question. This is not within the category of necromancy, for necromancy means that he beseeches the body of the dead or that he speaks by way of witchcraft, like someone who raises the dead. However, our case differs from the necromancer who raises the dead from the grave. The person in question beseeches not the body of the dead but his spirit, and the spirit is not termed “dead.”

Rabbi Eliezer draws a fine but distinct line between actually using the dead person’s earthly remains, and a vow made by a dying man to return in a spiritual form from the afterworld. The purpose of this vow is either to reveal certain truths or to report what he “knows” from the afterlife, or as we shall see later, to report delivery of requests to the power that lay beyond, on behalf of the living. The first distinction made is a temporal one: the necromancer’s artifact for divination is already dead, while the Jewish practice involves a living person who is willing to take a vow to return. The second distinction involves the use of a dead body as opposed to consulting the spirit of the dead. According to the Jewish belief, since the spirit is of heavenly qualities it must, therefore, return to its origin—the heavens. Nonetheless, due to its heavenly qualities, it has potential knowledge of heavenly matters—sometimes of critical importance to mortals. That is why people would wish to “strike a pre-mortem deal” with the dying person to conjure the spirit by making a vow or oath to return after

⁵⁹ SHW §305.

death and to report on their experience. The practice itself is not fully described in *Sefer Yereim* and we must assume it was known to the readers. However, in another, previously mentioned, contemporary source, the *Book of the Pious*, a clearer description of the practice is found in an exemplum, which depicts what appears to have been a well-known practice:

A righteous man was dying. On his deathbed he was approached by a man who was bewitched: he and his wife were under a spell and she could not conceive. The husband asked the dying man to go before the Holy One, blessed be He as soon as he arrived in the afterworld and to ask for the spell to be broken ... And the dying man made this vow and died. That same year the spell was broken and she conceived.⁶⁰

In this source the discussion is not a legal-academic one, but rather what seems from the story to be a fairly acceptable practice acknowledged by the author, one that occurred in his own cultural sphere. The practice described briefly, but rather clearly, is as follows: A couple, suffering from an insoluble medical situation and with no apparent physical cause, turn to a dying righteous man, explain their problem, and ask the man to vow that he will do everything in his power in the other world on their behalf. While on his deathbed this dying person can guarantee, in the form of a vow, or contract between himself and the supplicants that he will actually deliver the supplicant's request to higher authorities "post mortem." In order to strengthen the practice, the exemplum states, as in many accounts found in the vast *miracula* collections in medieval Europe that the mechanism actually works for the spell was broken and the woman became pregnant. The wording of the story suggests that it was the righteous man's intervention that "did the trick" although in the story the dying man is not reported as having fulfilled his part of the "arrangement," namely, to inform the couple of his mission. It should be noted that this practice is not unique to members of the Jewish minority in medieval Europe. *Vitae* of medieval saints suggest that this practice was quite common among Christian saints or at least a common notion among those recording the vita.⁶¹

At this point I refer once again to a nuance in the polemic accounts from NV, whose anonymous author, as can be recalled, stated that prayer and praise can only come from the living. It seems that we might be looking here at a unique inner-Jewish mechanism of trying to develop an alternative ritual to the growing Christian pressure regarding the healing powers of saints. Whether this alternative ritual actually became common practice, remains a question for future research to discover; however, to further strengthen my argument and to bring to a full circle up to the later middle ages, where we have found rabbinic support of the custom of visiting the graves, I bring yet another Jewish polemical text from the early fifteenth century.

⁶⁰ SHW §1566.

⁶¹ In the *Vita* of St. Sturm, for example, the recorder tells of people who gathered around the dying saint's death bed asking him to intercede with the almighty on their behalf. He promises to help if they, for their part, try to be good Christians. See Thomas F. X. Noble and Thomas Head, eds., *Soldiers of Christ: Saints and Saints' Lives from Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (University Park, PA 1995) 265. I wish thank William C. Jordan for calling my attention to this matter and these sources.

Sefer Hanizzahon, literally *The Book of Debate*, was probably written sometime between 1401 and 1405 in Prague.⁶² Not to be confused with the previously quoted NV (with a similar Hebrew title) its author is not only not anonymous like NV’s author but the rather well known Rabbi Yom Tov Lipman Mülhausen. His polemic was quoted by Christian opponents, translated into Latin, and even printed in a Hebrew edition with an introduction in Latin and Christian anti-Jewish polemic added by Theodor Hacksan in Nürenberg in 1644.⁶³ In this elaborate and rather well-known tractate, Lipman addresses not only what he considers Christian errors but also internal Jewish errors and skeptics (*meharherim*) who might, in his view, bring about the seeds of full blown apostasy.

More than twenty years ago, Frank Talmadge pointed out one such phenomenon in his Hebrew introduction to the modern photocopied edition of the seventeenth-century Latin-Hebrew edition of the text. Lipman considered some aspects of fifteenth-century Ashkenazi popular culture as problematic and had dealt with them in his polemic. Lipman first briefly comments on this “problem” in his discussion on the Jewish “credo” formulated in Deut. 6.4–10: “We should distance from us the belief in mediation and mediators (*melizim*).”⁶⁴ In a later statement (on Deut. 10.20), cross-referenced to this first statement he expands:

... and our Rabbis said : one should not put a mediator between oneself and the Creator ... for by turning to mediators one is drawn to the outer forces (*hachizoniyim* = diabolic powers) and to the impure spirit and eventually one is lowered in to the trap of idolatrous practice ... behold and understand (*re’eh vehaven*) that in all the prayers found in all twenty four books [of the Hebrew Bible] you will not find even one prayer that is directed to the mediators⁶⁵

At this point, anticipating that both Christians and doubting Jews would suggest possible textual proof to counter this argument, Lipman gives some of his own and generalizes:

And the fact that we found that the Israelites asked Moses and Samuel to pray on their behalf, and the fact that King Zedekiah asked the prophet Jeremiah to pray for him and the several instances mentioned in the Babylonian Talmud in tractate Ta’anith and even Moses himself who is the father of all prophets, all these when they beseeched God it was a living man (*adam hai*) they chose as their mediator who must not be confused with the deity. In all cases one should turn not to the mediator but rather to ask this man to help him and pray with him to the Lord may he be blessed and exalted.⁶⁶

⁶² Limor and Yuval (n. 54 above) 177 n. 12.

⁶³ This text has received much scholarly attention. For a list of the major works on this subject see Limor and Yuval (n. 54 above) 177 n. 5. I have used the photocopied edition: Yom Tov Lipman Mulhausen, *Sefer Hanizzahon*, intro. by Frank Talmage (Jerusalem 1984).

⁶⁴ Ibid. 85. The biblical Hebrew word *melitz* originally means linguistic interpreter and it appears in the story of Joseph’s encounter with his brothers who assumed that the Egyptian dignitary did not understand their language due to the presence of an interpreter (*melitz*) in the room (Gen. 42.23). In Talmudic Hebrew of late antiquity it came to mean an *advocatus*, i.e., someone who can either present a case well or poorly in a court of law. This is the meaning to which Lipman is referring in his argument against it; it is seen as a go-between and a mediator between oneself and the divine.

⁶⁵ Talmage, *Sefer Hanizzahon* (n. 63 above) 86.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

In Lipman's discussion we hear both his rebuke of Christian practices of seeing a dead man (Jesus) as a deity, beseeching the dead saints as well as his reckoning with Jews who from an informed point of view see parallels between their own practice of praying at cemeteries and the Christian practice of turning to the saints. Note Lipman's fine distinction between turning to a living man who mustn't be confused with the deity and the dead that might be mistaken as harboring divine qualities. This subtle difference is the same we saw in both the *Book of the Fearful* as well as in NV advocating that if one uses some form of indirect prayer directing one's prayer through a living human being is preferable to doing so with the earthly remains of a dead person.

When in 1175 Burchard of Strasbourg (Burchardus Argentoratensis) traveled to the Outremer, as Emperor Frederick Barbarosa's special envoy, he reported a prodigy he had witnessed at the site of the Greek Orthodox monastery of Saidnaiya (Our Lady) in the outskirts of Damascus.

On this panel a likeness of the Blessed Virgin had once been painted, but now, wondrous to relate a picture on wood has become incarnate, and oil, smelling sweeter than balsam, unceasingly flows from it. By which oil many Christians Saracens and Jews are often cured of ailment ... all the Saracens of the province flock to pray together with Christians and the Saracens perform their devotions there with great reverence.⁶⁷

From Burchard's account, which has been discussed recently by Bernard Hamilton, it is clear that the late twelfth-century diplomat was amazed, if not puzzled, at this multi-denominational site of religious pilgrimage and faith healing he encountered. Although the site in question is not a gravesite it is certainly a healing shrine similar in function to the one's Burchard was accustomed to in his native Lotharingia. In the Near East, to this day, local regional and super-regional saints are shared by members of different faiths, venerated together, and they serve as a focus for votive offerings and prayers for healing by a larger circle than their respective community. In contrast, it would seem that medieval Jews were not a common sight in the shrines of the European healing saints. However, the evidence we have assembled points to the fact that the shrines and the healing saints were ever present in the inter-religious discussion and polemics of medieval Europe. Jews who were part of this discussion could not avoid the appeal of these shrines and the healing they offered. Since they were truly challenged by these notions, we have suggested that they have devised their own mechanisms to meet this challenge. Although the sources I quoted were constructed by the learned elite and not by the "masses" that were probably more attuned to the practices discussed, the very existence of a "problem" in need of discussion is, in itself, an important bit of information. However, further investigation into this matter, especially in the still vastly uncharted and to date, only partially explored, world of Jewish medieval manuscripts might well yield some more telling

⁶⁷ Bernard Hamilton, "Our Lady of Saidnaiya: An Orthodox Shrine Revered by Muslims and Knights Templar at the Time of the Crusades," *The Holy Land, Holy Lands and Christian History: Papers Read at the 1998 Summer Meeting and the 1999 Winter Meeting of The Ecclesiastical History Society*, ed. R. N. Wanson (London 2000) 206–214.

and illuminating material. It is my belief that there is much more to this phenomenon than meets the eye at present. Future research into these matters will doubtless be of importance both to Jewish Studies as well as to medieval European Studies, from this yet unexplored point of view.⁶⁸

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⁶⁸ I dedicate this article to the sacred memory to my paternal grandfather, Ephraim Ervin Steiner (1886–1944). He was born in Vienna, lived in Budapest, and was martyred on the banks of the Danube River during the bloody days of December 1944. His body was never recovered and brought to a proper Jewish burial. “One should not build an elaborate monument over the tombs of the truly righteous; their words and deeds are their true memory” (Jerusalem Talmud, Tractate *Shekalim* 2.1).

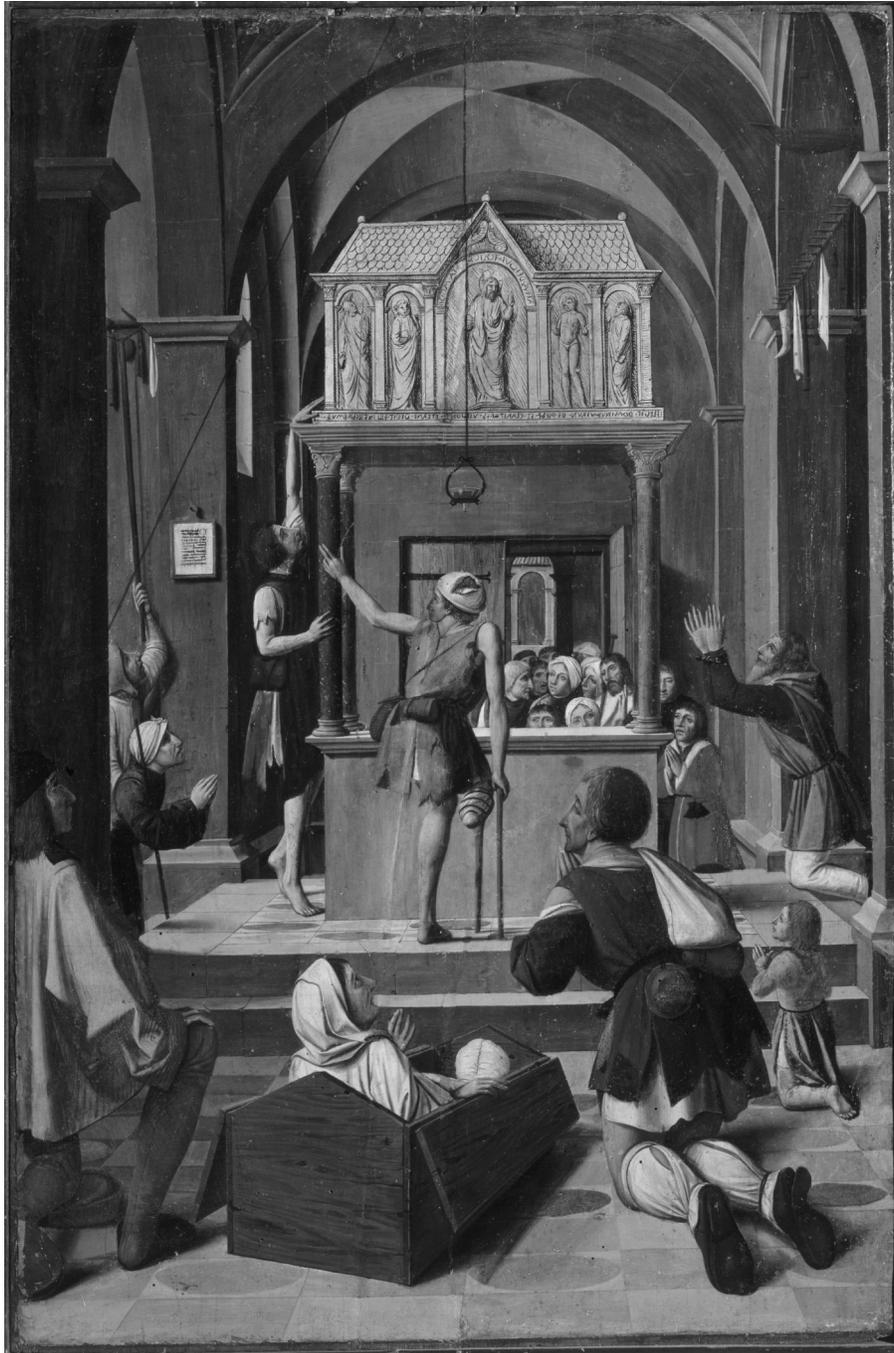


FIG. 1. Josse Lieferinxe, "Pilgrims at the Tomb of St. Sebastian," 1497; Rome, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica.

Das buchlein der zuflucht zu Maria
der muter gottes in alten Ding Darinn
auch viſach vderet vñ verzayhent ſynd vil der mercklich-
ſten vñ namhaſtigſten wüderzaychen vñ wercken durch
die hochwürdigſten gottes muter vñ iuncfrawen Maria
erzaygt den yhenen die in iren nöten die ſelb muter der gna-
den angerüffen vnd ſye zü allen öting haynzufuchen ge-
läßt haben.



FIG. 2. Jacob Issickemer, Buchlein der Zurflucht Zu Maria in Alten-Otting (Nuremberg: Caspar Hochfeder, after 15 Oct. 1497) Ai recto, 1st leaf, woodcut illustration. The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York. PML 36051.

