

The Humble Sage and the Wandering Madman: Madness and Madmen in an Exemplum from *Sefer Ḥasidim*

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NOTWITHSTANDING ITS, AT TIMES, notably pietistic nature, *Sefer Ḥasidim* (henceforth *SH*)¹ provides modern scholars with a glimpse of the mindset, mentality, and culture of medieval Ashkenazi Jewry. In his insightful and fundamental study of this work, Ivan Marcus characterizes its role as follows:

Like Caesarius of Heisterbach's *Dialogus Miraculorum*, *Sefer Ḥasidim* is a *speculum* of the society in which it originated. It contains allusions to knights and demons, princes and prices, grain profiteering, monastic practices, tensions in communal politics, Jewish-Christian debates, conversion in both directions, coin clipping, sexual promiscuity, local customs, women's occupations in weaving and money lending, and a variety of other facts of medieval culture and life in medieval Germany.²

Missing from this cogent observation is *SH*'s treatment of madness. Bearing in mind its role as a source for social attitudes, I wish to take a fresh look at one of the more than four hundred exempla found in *SH*. This exemplum is pertinent to the study of madness in medieval European Jewish society. Its story illumines questions of madness, marginality, in-

1. I will rely on Judah ben Samuel he-Hasid, *Sefer Ḥasidim*, ed. J. Wistinetzki and J. Freiman (Frankfurt am Main, 1924). This edition relies on MS Parma H3280 (henceforth *SHP* in specific citations).

2. Ivan G. Marcus, *Piety and Society: The Jewish Pietists of Medieval Germany* (Leiden, 1981), 131.

sanity's social aspects, and how madmen were perceived and treated by medieval European society at large and by its Jewish minority.⁵

Before proceeding to the exemplum itself, some preliminary remarks about madness and the insane in the European Middle Ages are in order. From antiquity through the Early Modern period, abnormal or insane behavior was often linked to demonic possession. Demons were thought to torment the possessed, thus relieving these individuals of legal responsibility for their actions. Some medieval cures for possession and madness utilized physical violence, seeking to discomfort and thereby "drive out" the demons. These "cures" legitimized abuse and torture. The English mystic Margery Kempe—herself at first thought to be mad—speaks of a madwoman she was asked to heal. Confined in chains to a small chamber on the outskirts of the English town of Kings Lynn because of her unbearable yelling, this woman was pushed to the margins because "most people would not suffer her to dwell among them."⁴ In late medieval Germany there was even a specific term for chambers used for locking up madmen: *Tollkisten* (cages for the mad).⁵

Insane individuals were classified according to two distinct categories: harmless and raving.⁶ The harmless, peaceable, though at times boister-

3. The issue of how to approach social and cultural data captured in medieval Hebrew exempla was the center of a recent debate. See Eli Yassif, "Legends and History: Historians Read Hebrew Legends of the Middle Ages" (Hebrew), *Zion* 64 (1999): 187–220, as well as Moshe Rosman's response and Yassif's answer to Rosman's critique in *Zion* 65 (2000): 209–18, 219–27. I personally favor Rosman's view.

4. When believed mad, Margery Kempe herself was confined to a small room and locked up. See William Butler-Bowdon, ed. and trans., *The Book of Margery Kempe* (New York, 1944), 1–2. See also C. W. Atkinson, *Mystic and Pilgrim: The Book and the World of Margery Kempe* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1983), 15. For the story of the madwoman whom Margery tried to help, see *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 75. In his discussion of the issue of divorcing a mad spouse, Maimonides uses almost identical phrasing when he describes the hardship of living with an insane spouse: "For it is unbearable for a sane person (*ben-da'at*) to live in the same house with an insane person (*shotim*)" (*Mishneh Torah, Book of Women, "Laws of Divorce,"* 10:23).

5. Christina Vanja, "Madhouses, Children's Wards, and Clinics: The Development of Insane Asylums in Germany," *Institutions of Confinement: Hospitals Asylums and Prisons in Western Europe and North America 1500–1950*, ed. N. Fintzsch and R. Jütte (Cambridge, 1996), 117–32.

6. I mention but a few outstanding works: T. K. Oesterreich, *Possession: Demoniacal and Other, among Primitive Races, in Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and Modern Times*, trans. D. Ibberson (New York, 1930); George Rosen, *Madness and Society: Chapters in the Historical Sociology of Mental Illness* (Chicago, 1968); Judith S. Neaman, *Suggestion of the Devil: The Origins of Madness* (New York, 1975); Bernard

ously merry fools were left to wander about the public sphere in relative freedom, collecting alms and charity. Judith Neaman described the common medieval nonviolent variety as “barefoot and breadless beggars.”⁷ Recently, James Brodman noted in his study of sick care in medieval Iberia that “people whose behavior we would now characterize as disturbed were not differentiated from the run of beggars until the 14th century, when society began to sort the poor into various categories.”⁸ The American cultural historian Sander Gilman points out that harmless madmen were represented both in literature and in the visual arts as part of the world of children, as being of “lesser mind” than normal adults.⁹ The raving mad, on the other hand, were considered a menace, a threat both to themselves and to society. Physical as well as textual evidence points to the segregation and imprisonment of these individuals, and even to their grave mistreatment.¹⁰ That a “code of mad behavior” existed both

Chaput, “La Condition Juridique et Sociale de l’aliéné mental,” *Aspects de la Marginalité au Moyen Age*, ed. G. H. Allard (Montreal, 1975), 39–47; Penelope B. R. Doob, *Nebuchadnezzar’s Children: Conventions of Madness in Middle English Literature* (New Haven, Conn., 1974); Muriel Laharie, *La folie au Moyen Age: XIe–XIIIe siècles* (Paris, 1991), and more recently, Barbara Newman, “Possessed by the Spirit: Devout Women, Demoniacs and the Apostolic Life in the Thirteenth Century,” *Speculum* 73 (1998): 733–70. See also Catherine J. Kudlick, “Disability History: Why We Need Another Other,” *AHR* 108 (2003): 763–93, esp. n. 4. On madness and madmen in medieval Islam, see Michael W. Dols, *Majnun: The Madman in Medieval Islamic Society*, ed. D. E. Immisch (Oxford, 1992); Boaz Shoshan, “The State and Madness in Medieval Islam,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 35 (2003): 329–40.

7. See n. 6.

8. James Brodman, *Charity and Welfare: Hospitals and the Poor in Medieval Catalonia* (Philadelphia, 1998), 85.

9. See Sander Gilman, *Seeing the Insane: A Cultural History of Madness and Art in the Western World from the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1982). A similar notion appears in the medieval Ashkenazi midrashic collection *Yalkut Shimon* attributed to the thirteenth-century rabbi Shimon of Frankfurt. In a passage relating to the dialogue between David and God regarding madness (related to 1 Sam 21), David describes a madman’s behavior and social resonance in the public sphere. The description quoted in *Yalkut Shimon* relies heavily on *Midrash Sholter Tov* on Ps 34. However, several remarks in Rabbi Shimon’s version of the text, absent from the original *MST*, suggest that part of the description was inserted either by R. Shimon or by an unknown medieval contemporary: “a man walks in the market place tearing his clothes and the children mock him and chase him and the crowd laughs at his dismay.” See Shimon of Frankfurt, *Yalkut Shimon*, ed. D. Hyman and Y. Shiloni (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 1999), vol. 6, par. 131.

10. See n. 6 above, and A. Sander, “Die Dollen in der Kiste—Zur Behandlung von die Geisteskranken in den Spätmittelalterlichen Städten,” *Festschrift Peter Burghaus zum 70 Geburtstag*, ed. A. Albrecht (Münster, 1989), 147–67.

in antiquity and in medieval Europe is evident from the fact that the sane could in extreme cases adopt this code and convincingly impersonate madness.¹¹

With these observations in mind let us now turn to the exemplum from *SH* about “The Humble Sage.”

A man was captive in a far away land. He said to himself, “How shall I set about¹² observing the Sabbath,” and he decided to feign madness. Children jested with him and gave him bread. On the Sabbath he was not to be found on the streets, but rather he went home to jest there. After a time, a party of Jews accompanying a certain gentile dignitary came to that place. Overhearing the Jews speaking in the Holy Tongue (= Hebrew), the captive approached them and asked them to take him away from that place.

They said to him, “Do not talk to us in the Holy Tongue, for they might identify you as a Jew, but rather throw mud at us in the presence of the dignitary we are accompanying and mock us.”

They addressed the dignitary, “We beseech you, let us handle this madman, for we wish to take him out of town to exact our revenge.”

The dignitary handed him over to the Jews, who humiliated him by tying him to a horse’s tail. They took him out of the town and after interrogating him discovered that he was learned in Torah. They asked his forgiveness for having humiliated him in that fashion, explaining that they did so in order that they would not disclose the fact that he is a Jew.

“I forgive you,” he said.

“Do we need atonement?” they asked, “for we could have ransomed you for money. However, we preferred to humiliate you and tear your hair so that they would not discover that you are a Jew.”

11. Impersonating a madman is a well-known motif in medieval European folklore. See Stith Thompson, *Motif Index in Folk Literature*, (Bloomington, Ind., 1955), K1818.3. In this respect, the case of David’s convincing impersonation of a madman in the court of the Philistine King Achish of Gath comes to mind (1 Sam 21.10–15). The Jew in our story may have been consciously imitating David.

12. The Hebrew word used here is אַעֲטֹק. This alludes to the laws of מַזְעֵסֵק (lit. engaged a reduced conscious level of performing an act), which, halakhically speaking, is a reduced level of work on the Sabbath.

He replied, "Of you the verse says, *Faithful are the wounds of a friend* (Prov 27.6). Even if I were your father, you would not need to ask for penance, for your reward is great."

"Please accept the money that we should have used for your ransom," they said, but he refused. (*SHP* 902)

Although fictional, and treating not an actual madman but someone deliberately feigning madness, this story is revealing. Like many medieval exempla, it was designed to preach moral values as well as to entertain. Part of its appeal lies in its familiar setting and mores. In the scenario played out here the characters adhere to the accepted medieval European social codes. Although all the Jewish figures in the story are "putting on an act," each had to give a convincing performance. I intend to treat this story as a source for social attitudes toward madmen in the medieval European world.

Set among other moral teachings and exempla designed to instill humility and abstinence from using one's scholarly knowledge to yield material gains, the story reveals how Jews treated those they believed mad. It tells of a Jew held captive in a distant land. The circumstances of his capture remain unspecified but these were apparently not outside the purview of the exemplum's potential audience, living as it did in proximity to the twelfth- and thirteenth-century frontier of the *Regum Teutonicum*. In order to observe Jewish law, especially Sabbath restrictions, a central component of his personal and religious identity, the captive hit upon the idea of impersonating madness. By adopting this facade he revoked an essential identity component, that of social acceptance, and assumed the role of the local "town fool" who prefers the company of children to that of adults. Exchanging the external role of a member in a religious minority group on the margins of society (Judaism) for identification as a socially marginal personality (madness) enables the captive to retain elements of his Jewish identity when not exposed to the public eye.

It seems that a considerable amount of time passed from the moment of capture until the story's turning point. During this period the captive successfully established a regular pattern of life on the margins, confirming his social status and role as a harmless fool and joining an alternative social circle, the world of children. His captors' society became accustomed to his presence and, under the cover of folly, he managed to live a sustainable life, retaining fragments of his religious identity. The pivotal point of the plot arrives when several Jewish travelers accompanying a

Christian dignitary, probably as part of his entourage, ride into town.¹³ The Jews, like the captive they were about to encounter, were in an alien environment, away from their community. They too clung to a bonding internal identity component, signified by their use of the Hebrew language for conversation among themselves. Unaware of the captive's true identity and mistaking him for what he impersonated—a mad fool—the Jews spoke Hebrew in his presence, with no inkling that the fool could actually comprehend what they said. Upon overhearing their conversation, the captive recognized their true identity and seized this chance to escape. He approached the traveling Jews secretly and, using their inner coded language, Hebrew, which may have startled them, asked his coreligionists to free him. Their initial reaction was to avoid any association with the fool. Nonetheless, they listened to his plea and devised a plan to help him, simultaneously intending to hide any connection with him. This fact is revealing; it seems that the Jews were either not convinced he was what he claimed to be, or, uncertain as to whether he was only feigning madness, feared he might actually be insane. The latter seems more likely. If that was the case, it made sense to avoid being associated with him. The latter hypothesis, as we will see, is more consistent with the plot, perhaps reflecting the way Jews thought of, and treated, madmen.

The traveling Jews devised the following plan: the captive would attack them both physically and verbally. They in turn would ask the nobleman, who apparently had some sort of local jurisdiction, for permission to take action against their mad assailant. At this point they would suggest to the nobleman that they be allowed to drag the madman outside the city limits where they would execute violent retribution for his acts, using this cover story to smuggle the captive out of town and to set him free.¹⁴ The essence of the ruse straddles the fine line between societal

13. Medieval Jews might accompany a Christian dignitary for several reasons: as traders wishing to enjoy the safety of a caravan with an armed escort; if they sought a personal audience; or if they needed his adjudication in a lawsuit they were bringing. They also might have joined him so as to keep an eye on him, as in the twelfth-century case of Hermanus of Köln, who parted from his family and community to accompany a bishop at his court as well as on his travels to ensure that the prelate paid a debt owed to Hermanus's family. See Karl F. Morrison, *Conversion and Text: The Cases of Augustine of Hippo, Herman-Judah, and Constantine Tsatos* (Charlottesville, Va., 1992).

14. Jews normally could not execute violent retribution against non-Jews; however, this case differs, for it deals with Jews who are far from their hometown. For extreme cases where the right to exact violent retribution was granted to Jews, see Elliott Horowitz, "'And It Was Reversed': Jews and Their Enemies in the Festivities of Purim" (Hebrew), *Zion* 59 (1994): 129–68.

perceptions of a merry fool as opposed to a raving madman. The Jews accompanying the nobleman, the nobleman himself, and the captive Jew assume that, once this line has been crossed, the now raving madman can be subjected not only to ridicule as the fool when among the children, but to violent abuse by adults, even by passing Jews, so long as they receive permission from the proper authorities. This line of action is not unknown in medieval and early modern writing about madness and appears frequently in exempla collections as well as in the growing numbers of books about medieval madness. In some cases, it is clear that, once this line has been crossed, retribution can be immediate.¹⁵

The Jews decide to humiliate the captive. Not only are they granted permission to use corporal punishment, they do so in a gruesome manner, tying him by his hair to their horses' tails and dragging him "in disgrace" through the town and to its outskirts.¹⁶ We now come to the most puz-

15. An important contribution to the study of the history of madness was recently made by H. C. Erik Midelfort. See his *A History of Madness in Sixteenth-Century Germany* (Stanford, Calif., 1999). To illustrate the line between calm and comically foolish madmen and the raving mad, Midelfort quotes a story from a sixteenth-century book printed in Germany: "Once upon a time a man lost his mind as a result of sickness and became a fool. Once as he was walking up and down in the town as he had often done before, *young children and youths, large and small, ran after him, leaping and mocking him* until he was excited into anger . . . Another person was there, who took a stick and struck the fool on the head, opening a wound so that steam and smoke poured forth from his head. *And then he [the fool] immediately recovered his senses and wits, and when he saw himself surrounded by so many youths and children, he was ashamed.* And they asked him what was it like when he was out of his mind and saw so many youths around himself . . . There is no better medicine for the fools or for restoring the senseless to their senses than to open the head and let the steam escape. There is even a little verse to this effect: *O medici mediam capitis pertundite venam!* [Doctors perforate the middle vein of the head.!]” Johannes Pauli, *Schimpf und Ernst* (1522), ed. J. Bolte (Berlin, 1924), vol. 1, no. 23, 21–22; English translation cited from Midelfort, *Madness*, 235–36 (emphases are mine). Note that this madman’s social group is again that of youths and children.

16. Banishment from a town was in and of itself a grave form of punishment. See Bronislav Geremek, “The Marginal Man,” *The Medieval World*, ed. J. Le-Goff, trans. L. G. Cochrane (London, 1997), 347–74. As for dragging someone to his place of execution tied to the tail of a horse, this mode of punishment was familiar in medieval Western Europe and was usually applied to an existing corporal sentence as extra punishment and humiliation. See Zephira Entin-Rokeah, “The Jewish Church Robbers and Host Desecrators of Norwich (ca. 1285),” *REJ* 141 (1982): 345. For a thirteenth-century visual representation of this practice, see Susan Lewis, *The Art of Matthew Paris in the Chronica Majora* (Berkeley, Calif., 1987), 234–35.

zling issue: was all this subterfuge necessary? Was it not possible simply to ransom the Jewish captive instead of subjecting him to such a degrading ordeal?

The background to the story is the commandment to ransom Jewish captives and free them from subjugation. This precept was usually followed; it did, however, provoke halakhic deliberation in Late Antiquity, reflected in the Babylonian Talmud and in other authoritative Jewish sources.¹⁷

The ending of the story seems to indicate that the common practice was to ransom captives in exchange for money or goods. However, in this case the Jews' primary motivation was to conceal both the captive's religious identity and any affiliation between them. This emerges clearly from the post-rescue discussion between the Jews and the captive, recorded in the final part of the story. The Jews apparently feared that revelation of the captive's true religious identity would endanger not only the rescue operation but them as well. The text describes the discussion as an inquiry. In accordance with the moral of the story, that of humility, as well as not aiming to achieve material gain from knowledge of the Torah, the captive apparently did not disclose his true identity even when already at some distance from the town. It was only after being interrogated by his rescuers, or shall we say torturers, that his true identity as a sage emerged.

At this point the text reveals the rescuers' true amazement and perplexity. They are guilt ridden when confronted by the fact that the "madman" was a sage. In their dismay they disclose an important bit of information to the reader, namely, that the established procedure of ransoming was an a priori possibility. This option, not divulged earlier in the text, alters our understanding of the situation. It seems now that the scam used by the rescuers, negotiating the fine line between a tame and a raving madman, was but one of several options for freeing the captive. If this was the case, why then did they not suggest ransoming the captive in the first place? The repetition of the Jews' plea for forgiveness by the captive and for atonement (*kappara*) intensifies this sense. I think that the traveling Jews found the captive's ruse so convincing that, even after discovering his status and true religious identity, they still believed him to be a fool

17. bGit 45a. And see Salo W. Baron, *The Jewish Community: Its History and Structure to the American Revolution* (Philadelphia, 1942), 1:79–80, 1:306–7, 2:233–39. In the Bologna edition of *Sefer Ḥasidim* (1538) the issue of ransoming captives appears in the context of ransoming Jewish books that have fallen captive in the hands of non-Jews (*SHB* 926).

not worthy of ransom. That is the basis for how they orchestrated the plan, and it explains their intense guilt feelings when the captive's true intellectual identity came to light in the aftermath of his mistreatment at their hands. I believe that in the minds of the wayfaring Jews, and perhaps also in those of the story's projected audience, there was a different price for a captive Jewish madman as opposed to a captive Jewish sage. Both were entitled to be freed and brought back to the safe haven of a Jewish community; however, the implementation of their ransom differed somewhat. A madman, even a Jewish one, was not worthy of being ransomed properly. Moreover, since the commonly accepted notion was that madmen lacked shame, there seems to have been little moral scruple involved in subjecting even a Jewish madman to degradation while rescuing him from captivity. Although we could perhaps argue that the Jews were simply "putting on" a very convincing act, the ending of the story suggests that their intentions went beyond that point, in the process exposing the treatment raving Jewish madmen received in medieval Europe.¹⁸

Reading closely into the text we find that the manner in which Jews treated people labeled as mad closely resembled the behavioral code practiced in their immediate surroundings. Furthermore, the story of the humble sage suggests that there might have been separate "price tags" for different individuals in medieval Jewish society when the question of ransoming Jewish captives arose. It also seems that the Jews in the story perhaps took pleasure in, or were at least indifferent to, the suffering and humiliation of a Jewish madman, or a Jew whom they believed to be mad.

This last observation is not surprising. I will now demonstrate that pious/pietistic circles truly feared that the treatment of the insane typical of the public realm would penetrate sacred space (the synagogue). A brief, unequivocally phrased remark from a different section of *SH*—an

18. A stark contrast to our story can be found in the relentless negotiations and very generous ransom offers made by German Jews to the imperial authorities during the years Rabbi Meir of Rothenburg was held captive by imperial decree in the Ensishaim and Wasserburg castles (1286–1293). The sixteenth-century Ashkenazi sage Rabbi Shlomo Luria (Maharshah) records a tradition that Rabbi Meir himself refused to be ransomed for the outrageous sums demanded by the imperial court; he died in prison. His earthly remains were eventually ransomed over a decade after his death by a rich Jew from Frankfurt. R. Meir was buried in Worms in May 1306. See Ephraim E. Urbach, *The Tosaphists: Their History, Writings and Methods* I-II (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 1980), 2:541–46

ethical ruling regarding the behavior appropriate to the synagogue—serves to corroborate this conjecture:¹⁹

Should this one come into my house? And Scripture states there: *to rave for me?* [1 Sam 21.15–16]. From this we conclude that a madman should not be admitted to a synagogue. Besides, he captures [disrupts] the intentions (נושל את הכוונה) of the prayers and he is subjected to ridicule. (SHP 458)²⁰

Designed to prevent a madman who roamed the streets begging and collecting alms, or wandered aimlessly, from entering a synagogue, this ruling is structured as an a fortiori argument stemming from the biblical case of David's feigned madness recounted in 1 Samuel 21.²¹ In the biblical narrative, David, on the run from the Israelite king Saul, was forced to flee to the land of the Philistines, where he was wanted for slaying Goliath. In an attempt to escape trial and possible execution by the Philistines, David decided to assume the role of a madman. The plan worked. Although apprehended by the Philistines, who recognized him and demanded revenge, David was denied admission to King Achish's court, as the biblical narrative relates:

And Achish said to his servants, "Look, do you see this man is raving mad! Why would you bring him to me? Do I lack madmen that you should bring this one to rave for me? Should this one come into my house?" (1 Sam 15–16)

19. On "sacred space," see Amos Rapaport, "Spatial Organization and the Built Environment," *Companion Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, ed. T. Ingold (London, 1994), 460–502; R. J. Zvi Werblowsky, "Mindscape and Landscape," *Sacred Space—Shrine, City, Land: Proceedings of the International Conference in Memory of Joshua Praver*, ed. B. Z. Kedar and R. J. Z. Werblowsky (London, 1998), 9–17; and Seth D. Kunin, *God's Place in the World: Sacred Space and Sacred Place in Judaism* (London, 1998).

20. This ruling is set in the midst of a cluster of ethical rulings aimed at regulating proper synagogue behavior and dress code. This issue was extremely important in the world of the Ashkenazi pietists. See Avraham Grossman, "Hatefillah be-mishnatam shel Ḥasidei Ashkenaz," *Sefer Yesburun*, ed. M. Shashar (Jerusalem, 1999), 27–56.

21. This statement is SH's own and to the best of my knowledge has no basis in any of the known exegetical sources referring to these verses from Samuel. We find similar rulings in both medieval and early modern Christianity as well as in Islam. See Thomas More, *A Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation, The Apology of Syr T. More Knyght 1533* (London Rastell), fols. 197–98; Dols, *Majnun*, 384.

On the basis of this verse, *SH* puts forth the following argument: if David, only pretending to be mad, was denied admission to the presence of a gentile flesh-and-blood king because of his behavior, then an actual madman definitely has no entrée to a synagogue, which resembles the Temple, the divine dwelling place on earth. Therefore the admission of a madman to the sacred space of the synagogue should be barred.

From its choice of words, as well as this ethical ruling's context—synagogal behavior and dress codes—it seems clear that pious circles were primarily concerned with those aspects of mad, though nonviolent, behavior that to their mind posed a threat to the sanctity of the synagogue. The colorful description found in the biblical parallel (1 Sam 21.14), *He [David] scrambled on the doors of the gate and drooled onto his beard*—a standard rabbinical commentary says he shouted loudly²²—as well as the possible nudity intimated by the ruling's context, explain why the madman was an unwelcome figure in the sanctuary.²³ Note, however, that the ruling provides two reasons for barring the madman from sacred space. First of all, his mere presence involuntarily stirs up commotion among other people reacting to his behavior. In addition, he also stimulates ridicule and inappropriate behavior on the part of the assembled congregation, leading to the “disruption of the prayer intentions.” Having seen how the purported madness of the “humble sage” elicited ridicule and inappropriate behavior on the part of the Jewish travelers, this second reason should not seem surprising. By his very presence, the madman disrupts proper concentration in prayer and elicits scorn, both unacceptable to *SH*. Furthermore, although the Hebrew term for scorn used here (משחקין עליו) can mean ordinary ridicule, it also denotes sexual foreplay, hinting at the potentially sexual nature of this mockery as well as at the madman's possibly ambiguous sexuality (a male using what might be considered distinctively female sexual gestures). Whatever the actions, they upset the expected behavioral code in the synagogue setting. The absence of any moral preaching on *SH*'s part to limit or check such behavior toward a madman is noteworthy; its occurrence is assumed as a given and not as a variable to be criticized. Pietistic writing in general, and *SH* specifically, has a very rigid agenda on behavioral matters and rarely passes over them in silence. It appears that no moral reckoning pertained to the harsh treatment of madmen, and *SH* here seems to accept the exist-

22. *Midrash Shoher Tov* on Psalms.

23. The ruling is set in the context of rulings designed to ensure proper reverence for the synagogue's sanctity. In the immediate context of this ruling we find another designed to prevent half-naked people, even laborers, from being in the presence of the Ark and the Torah scrolls in the synagogue (*SHP* 455).

ing social mores uncritically. It is less likely that it viewed this behavior as so ingrained as to be impossible to change.

In its discussion of how Jews should pick a place to live, *SH* compares Jewish and non-Jewish social conduct. One should favor a town where the non-Jewish community is known for its chaste behavior: “For . . . in most places the conduct and behavior of Jews basically resembles that of their local non-Jewish neighbors” (*SHP* 1301). This revealing observation harbors a considerable dose of self-reflection. It seems that even extremely pious Jews such as Rabbi Judah (“the Pious”) of Regensburg, the man to whom the greater part of *SH* is attributed, were aware of the fundamental similarity between the key social characteristics and behavioral codes of groups living in close physical proximity. Although dwelling within their own society, practicing their own religion, and often treated by the surrounding Christian majority as a pariah minority, Jews shared to a degree their neighbors’ beliefs and notions concerning various aspects of life. The social attitudes toward the sick, the deformed, and, as highlighted in this essay, the mentally disturbed, followed this pattern as well.²⁴

24. This is the main focus of my dissertation. See Ephraim Shoham-Steiner, “Social Attitudes toward Marginal Individuals in Jewish Medieval European Society” (Hebrew; Ph.D. diss., Hebrew University, 2002).