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in the Old Yiddish *Mayse-bukh* (Book of Stories, 1602)**

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The Writing Werewolf: Rabbinic Identity and Linguistic Understanding in the Old Yiddish *Mayse-bukh* (Book of Stories, 1602)

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Abstract: The rabbi-werewolf *mayse* portrays the rabbi as an outsider to both the Christian community and the Jewish one, thus also presenting an allegory of Jewish identity in the diaspora. Focusing on a rabbi and placing this medieval story tradition in a Jewish diaspora setting enable the early modern narrator to shift the meaning of wolfish otherness. In contrast to the more familiar heroes in the medieval werewolf tradition, who usually achieve social rehabilitation and restoration of their former status by the end of their tales, the rabbi achieves neither true redemption from his wolfish status nor eventual social reintegration. The rabbi's story highlights the contested status of Hebrew proficiency within the Yiddish-speaking diaspora. I argue that the solitary position of the werewolf is mirrored in the rabbi because he participates in a range of linguistic, social, religious, and cultural settings without ever being fully integrated.

The Austrian-Jewish philosopher Martin Buber (1878-1965) opens his famous *Die Legende des Baal-Schem* (The Legend of the Baal-Shem, 1908),¹ a collection of Hasidic tales, with a story titled "Der Werewolf" (The Werewolf). The story features the Baal Shem Tov (Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer, ca.1700-1760), a key founding figure of Eastern European Hasidism, as he comes face to face with a wolf that terrorizes a small Jewish community. The Baal Shem discovers that the wolf is a werewolf, a human trapped inside a wolf's body. The story offers no true happy end – the werewolf dies, and the Jewish children terrorized by the wolf are not able to return to their carefree states of mind. Rather than focusing on the magical abilities of transformation and the powers of the Baal Shem to bring peace to the world, the story focuses on the rabbi's ability to see beyond what is visible to the human eye. He

¹ Martin Buber, *Die Legende des Baal-Schem* (Frankfurt am Main: Literarische Anstalt / Rütten und Loening, 1908), 48–53.

is the only one who notices something amiss and discovers the frightened human heart inside the wolf, a traditional outsider figure. But what happens if the rabbi himself becomes the (were)wolf?

H. Leivick, a contemporary of Buber, answers this question in *Der volf* (The Wolf, 1920), a tale about trauma and persecution that features a rabbi who slowly transforms into a werewolf after a pogrom. He is redeemed on Yom Kippur at the sound of the shofar. Leivick's story is not the first to explore the entanglement of rabbinic and wolfish identity; more than 300 years earlier, a rabbi-werewolf makes its first prominent appearance in an Old Yiddish tale, which is the focus of this article. In this tale, while embodied as a wolf, the rabbi anticipates Buber's vision of the Baal Shem in his ability to see that which is hidden: in his ability to decipher signs and read clues that those surrounding him cannot understand. Like the Baal Shem, the rabbi is set apart by this ability, a feature signified by his physical form as a werewolf, the liminal outsider who exists simultaneously as a member of the world of humans and the world of animals.

The werewolf-rabbi's tale is one of 255 stories in the Old Yiddish *Mayse-bukh* (literally: Book of Stories). First published in Basel in 1602, the *Mayse-bukh* was one of the most influential and popular early modern Yiddish books. It includes stories that were populated not only by a werewolf but also by mischievous demons, a Talmud-teaching frog, and ill-fated lovers who marry in heaven.² Some stories have no known sources, but a large number are based on, or at least inspired by, Talmudic and Midrashic material, other Jewish story collections, or non-Jewish sources, including Italian, French, and German fabliaux and fable collections.³

In the *Mayse-bukh*, the story *מעשה אישט גישעהן אן אייניגן קוישטליכן רב דער זאס אים לאנד עשיר גינאנט עוץ דער וואר איין גרושר עשיר (175r, A Wonderful Tale that Happened to a Great Scholar Who Was also a Very Rich Man from the Land of Ouz)*⁴ tells of a rabbi transformed into a wolf by the power of a magic ring. With the help of a non-Jewish king, the rabbi can communicate his hidden human nature by writing his tale in Hebrew in the snow. This both anticipates and differs from Buber's account of the Baal Shem, who is able to transgress and reach into the wolf's heart, in a metaphysical sense, through his deep insight. While the *mayse's* rabbi shares this capacity for insight, his very identity is also marked by crossing the human-animal divide; the rabbi becomes the werewolf himself. The *mayse* draws on a medieval courtly werewolf tradition that includes Marie de France's Breton (Old French) lai

² The book was even translated into German soon after its publication by the Christian Hebraist Christoph Helwig: Christoph Helwig, *Jüdische Historien/ Oder/ Thalmudische/ Rabbinische/ wunderbarliche Legenden/ so von den Jüden als warhafftige und heylige Geschicht/ an ihren Sabbathen und Feyertagen gelesen werden: Darauß dieses verstockten Volcks Aberglauben und Fabelwerck zu ersehen / Auß ihren eigenen Büchern in Truck Teutsch verfertigt* (Giessen: Caspar Chemlein, 1611). Helwig actually chooses the werewolf *mayse* to open his selection of stories from the *Mayse-bukh*.

³ Jakob Meitlis, *Das Ma'assebuch, seine Entstehung und Quellengeschichte, zugleich ein Beitrag zur Einführung in die altjiddische Agada* (Berlin: Buchhandlung Rubin Mass, 1933), 106–20. Claudia Rosenzweig, "Magic Apples and Talking Frogs: Fairy Tales in the *Mayse-bukh*," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 71, no. 1 (2020): 121–25.

⁴ All Yiddish quotes based on שוין מעשה בוך איין (Eyn shoyrn Mayse-bukh), Basel 1602. The English translations follow Astrid Starck-Adler, "Mayse-Bukh and Metamorphosis," *Bulletin du Centre de recherche français à Jérusalem* no. 8 (2001), <http://journals.openedition.org/bcrfj/2092> (Accessed July 31, 2023). For a recent edition of *Mayse-bukh*, see Astrid Starck, *Un beau livre d'histoires = Eyn schön Mayse bukh: fac-similé de l'editio princeps de Bâle (1602)* (Basel: Schwabe, 2004).

Bisclavret (twelfth century) and the Breton Arthurian lai *Melion* (ca. 1190/1204), as well as on the Jewish-Christian “wolf-as-outsider” trope.

Focusing on a rabbi and placing this medieval story tradition in a Jewish diaspora setting enable the early modern narrator to shift the meaning of wolfish otherness. The tale portrays the rabbi as an outsider to both the Christian community and the Jewish one, thus also presenting an allegory of Jewish identity in the diaspora. The rabbi is highly educated and can access things hidden from others through his literary training. This knowledge and skill set grant him unique agency and the ability to explore various social settings and to perceive the world differently than his peers. But his understanding of the world also sets him apart and isolates him. His proficiency in various languages—including in Hebrew, Yiddish, and various ancient languages—is a central aspect of his communicative prowess, which bestows on him a singular status within both the Christian and Jewish communities.

Therefore, in contrast to the more familiar heroes in the medieval werewolf tradition, who usually achieve social rehabilitation and restoration of their former status by the end of their tales, the rabbi achieves neither true redemption from his wolfish status nor eventual social reintegration. Ultimately, the rabbi remains an outsider everywhere. His temporary werewolf status and his reliance on Hebrew within a Yiddish text both compound and symbolize an unstable and contested diaspora identity, a linguistic and cultural-religious displacement. The rabbi’s story highlights the contested status of Hebrew proficiency within the Yiddish-speaking diaspora. I argue that the solitary position of the werewolf is mirrored in the rabbi because he participates in a range of linguistic, social, religious, and cultural settings without ever being fully integrated.

In what follows, I will first explore the werewolf *mayse* as a late adaption of the medieval “noble werewolf” tradition before exploring the role of Hebrew as the rabbi’s foremost identity-defining language characteristic—especially vis-à-vis Yiddish as the everyday language of his intra-textual community and the *Mayse-bukh*’s readership. Next, I explore how his literacy, which encompasses more than 70 languages, extends to the world of semiotics, the non-verbal signs that, unlike all the other characters in the story, he is able to read and manipulate.

The Werewolf *Mayse* in Context

The rabbi-werewolf *mayse* gained attention as part of the larger study of the *Mayse-bukh*. As one of the stories without a direct traceable source, scholars have drawn parallels to other non-Jewish medieval and early modern material. Focusing on elements such as the speaking animal, the magic ring, the animal-human transformation, and the forest as a place of magic suggests some affinity with a fairy and folk tale tradition. Since most of these features are also central to fictional medieval story worlds in general and the medieval werewolf story tradition specifically, the Old Yiddish literature scholar Astrid Lembke highlights key parallels between the werewolf *mayse* and Marie de France’s *Bisclavret*. Lembke argues that both stories use the werewolf trope to discuss men navigating homosocial relationships in the face of deficient marital bonds.⁵ Astrid Stark-Adler shows in her

⁵ Astrid Lembke, “Das unwillige Untier. Ehe, Gefolgschaft und Autonomie in den französischen und jiddischen Werwölferzählungen Maries de France (12. Jh.) und im ‘Mayse-Bukh’ (1602),” *Germanisch-Romanische Monatsschrift* 68, no. 1 (2018): 3; Astrid Lembke, “The Raging Rabbi: Aggression and Agency in an Early Modern Yiddish Werewolf Tale (*Mayse-bukh* 1602),” in *Monsters*

analysis and translation of the story that all human-animal transformation stories in the *Mayse-bukh* take part not only in a fictional tradition featuring metamorphosis but also in a religious discourse about transformation and supernatural powers.⁶ With a focus on animal encounters in several Old Yiddish tales, Iris Idelson-Shein argues that animality becomes the means by which an author grapples with the contested and at times liminal status of Yiddish as a language of literature in Ashkenaz vis-à-vis the older and more established languages of Hebrew and German.⁷ Building on Idelson-Shein's explorations of animality as a sign of the liminal status of Yiddish, I argue that it is actually Hebrew that becomes the contested language in this *mayse*, and ultimately a symbol of diaspora identity.

The rabbi-werewolf *mayse* is one of several that focus on unnamed rabbis in *goles* (the diaspora). The rabbi is introduced as a generous scholar, learned in the Talmud and in 70 languages. He is beloved by the poor in the community for his generosity and popular among students near and far. His wife, however, is unhappy with his extensive charitable giving. After losing all his wealth due to his generosity, the rabbi hatches a plan, taking 50 of his students from town to town. At first, he maintains the impression that his group is wealthy, and townsfolk take him and his students in. Once the money runs out, however, the townspeople's generosity subsides. One night in the forest, he observes a weasel who drops אין היפש גולדן וינגארליין (176r) (a lovely little golden ring) that at first seems ניקש ווערט (worthless). The rabbi picks it up and reads in its inscription that it has magical powers. The rabbi returns to his students with the good news that their luck has changed, withholding the truth from them by fabricating a story about a wealthy benefactor. The group returns to their hometown, where he finds those in need, whom he had previously supported, suffering because of his absence.

The rabbi's generosity and wealth restore the former state of things, but his wife is suspicious of her husband's newfound riches. Pressed hard, he shares with her the secret of the ring. Long tired of her husband, the *rebbetzin* (rabbi's wife) uses the ring to turn her husband into a werewolf: איין ווער וואלף ווער אונט ליפא אים וואלד אונטיר דען (was a werewolf and runs to the forest to be with the other wild animals). The townsfolk and students are not unduly surprised or concerned by his absence as he had previously left town and then returned. Meanwhile, the rabbi haunts the forest, attacking animals and humans. The king of the land decides to end the wolf's terror, offering his daughter as a reward to whomever can capture or kill the wolf. The king's advisor tames the wolf, turning him into a trusted companion. The young man is, therefore, given the king's daughter in marriage and later ascends to the throne. On a snowy winter day, the new king and his companions are out hunting with the wolf. Trying to communicate his humanity, the wolf takes the opportunity to write a Hebrew text in the snow. A counselor identifies and translates the writing, which details the rabbi's story and the use of the magic ring. Thereafter, the king, dressed as a merchant, visits the *rebbetzin*, takes the ring from her, and

and Monstrosity in Jewish History: From the Middle Ages to Modernity, ed. Iris Idelson-Shein and Christian Wiese (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 203. Note that, in Greek myths and early modern witchcraft accusations, werewolves are exclusively described as male. In contrast, female witches are portrayed as riding on wolves in the early modern period. Cf. Jane P. Davidson and Bob Canino, "Wolves, Witches, and Werewolves: Lycanthropy and Witchcraft from 1423 to 1700," *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 2, no. 4 (8) (1990): 50.

⁶ Starck-Adler, "Mayse-Bukh and Metamorphosis."

⁷ Iris Idelson-Shein, "Kill the Hen That Crows Like a Cock: Animal Encounters in Old Yiddish," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 71, no. 2 (Autumn 2020): 322.

restores the rabbi to his human form. The rabbi then takes his revenge on his wife, whom he turns into a donkey, making her carry stones to build a new synagogue. Friends and family are horrified and beg for mercy on behalf of the *rebbetzin*, but the rabbi refuses to re-transform his wife; she remains a donkey. Soon, the rabbi dies, and his ring is lost forever, but his children live in wealth. The story thus begins and ends with a moral common in this type of medieval and early modern short story. It is a moral that, in this case, draws on supposed words of wisdom from King Solomon—himself the hero of another *mayse* (no. 105)—about the untrustworthiness of women: דוא זולשט דייגם ווייב קיין סוד פאר טרויאן דען זיא פאר מסרן איינין (177r) (King Solomon said: “Never tell secrets to your wife, because she will end up revealing them”).

The werewolf *mayse* is based on Christian, non-religious tales about so-called “noble” werewolves, most prominently featured in Breton literature. The medieval tradition takes place within a Christian courtly society,⁸ presenting noblemen involuntarily trapped in wolves’ bodies by wicked women.⁹ These tales use the werewolf trope to highlight flawed human traits, creating “cautionary tale[s] about human behavior.”¹⁰ They explore questions of courtly social behavior and relations as well as hidden human fears and desires.¹¹ The paradigm of these stories is Marie de France’s Breton lai *Bisclavret* (twelfth century), which tells the tale of a knight who is forced to become a werewolf for three days every week.¹² His wicked wife learns about this power and takes his clothes, which he needs to return to human form. By trapping her husband in his lupine body, she rids herself of her husband and takes a new lover. Ultimately, the werewolf becomes the companion of the good king, who, with the help of the wolf and his confessing wife, discovers the plot and helps *Bisclavret* return to his human form. In its narrative turns, *Bisclavret* highlights the conflict between society and nature captured in the hero’s transformational abilities, which offer him freedom from social obligations.¹³

Other werewolf tales include the Breton Arthurian lai *Melion* (ca. 1190/1204), in which a nobleman, Melion, besotted with a flawed maiden, transforms into a wolf to hunt a stag (enabled by a magic ring), which he promises as proof of his love. After a successful hunt, the maiden uses the ring’s magical powers to trap Melion in his lupine form. Like the king in *Bisclavret*, King Arthur discovers the true identity of

⁸ As a literary trope, werewolves are featured in only a few texts; most others simply include anthropomorphized wolves in the fable tradition (e.g., the European medieval Reynard and Ysengrimus models), humans dressed as wolves (e.g., the Old Norse *Volsunga Saga*), the evocation of good or bad lupine character traits through wolfish names (e.g., the Middle High German *Wolfdietrich* and *Helmbrecht*), or the encounter of wolves and humans (*Wolfdietrich* or the medieval use of Romulus and Remus).

⁹ Leslie A. Sconduto, *Metamorphoses of the Werewolf: A Literary Study from Antiquity through the Renaissance* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2008), 14.

¹⁰ Miranda Griffin, “The Beastly and the Courtly in Medieval Tales of Transformation,” in *The Beautiful and the Monstrous: Essays in French Literature, Thought and Culture*, ed. Amaleena Damlé and Aurélie L’Hostis (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010), 149.

¹¹ Lembke, “Das unwillige Untier,” 14; Gloria Thomas Gilmore, “Marie de France’s *Bisclavret*: What the Werewolf Will and Will Not Wear,” in *Encountering Medieval Textiles and Dress: Objects, Texts, Images*, ed. Désirée G. Koslin and Janet E. Snyder (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2002), 74; Sconduto, *Metamorphoses of the Werewolf*, 57.

¹² Marie de France’s tale was widely received and adapted into other languages (including Old Norse) by the Middle Ages.

¹³ Gilmore, “Marie de France’s *Bisclavret*,” 81; Lembke, “Das unwillige Untier,” 2–3. These escapist measures are marked as unsustainable as the story offers an implicit warning against taking such unknighly and uncourtly liberties.

the wolf and brings about a happy end for the noble knight. In another Arthurian werewolf tale, the anonymous Cymro-Latin prose romance *Garlagon* (thirteenth or fourteenth century), a witch transforms her husband into a wolf who wins the favor of his king and is eventually transformed back. The Old French *Guillaume de Palerne* (ca. 1200) diverges from the other texts as its benevolent werewolf is not the main character but the assistant to the main characters and has been transformed by his evil, witch-like stepmother.

A Rabbi as Werewolf

Scholarship has traditionally identified three stages in the historical fascination with werewolves: antiquity, the high Middle Ages¹⁴—referred to as the “werewolf renaissance of the twelfth century,” manifest in religious-philosophical and ethno-historiographical texts¹⁵—and the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The latter discourse does not occur in fictional or religious-philosophical literature but in the context of witchcraft treatises and trials.¹⁶ While temporally belonging to this

¹⁴ The medieval Jewish pietist movement *Hasidei Ashkenaz* [Pietists of Ashkenaz] – a group prominently featured in the second group of stories of the *Mayse-bukh* – pondered questions regarding werewolf transformation in the context of general human transformability and bodily identity. See David I. Shyovitz, “Christians and Jews in the Twelfth-Century Werewolf Renaissance,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 75, no. 4 (October 2014): 523. The larger body of non-fictional texts supports the idea that the “great divide” between humans and animals that dates to the expulsion from the Garden of Eden cannot be overcome. Basing their opinions on Augustine, religious authorities argued that humans cannot become animals or vice versa, although demons and the devil may use elaborate tricks to make them appear as such. The question was again raised in the context of alchemy. Caroline Walker Bynum has illustrated that, for Christian theologians, the werewolf fulfilled a similar role and was used as a “safe” paradigm with which to approach fundamental questions and physical-bodily implications of the Eucharist and Christ’s resurrection. Caroline Walker Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity* (New York: Zone Books, 2001), 990. The discourse of *Hasidei Ashkenaz* on the matter demonstrates that Christians were not the only ones concerned with werewolves in a religious discourse centering on the possibility of transformation. Shyovitz, “Christians and Jews in the Twelfth-Century Werewolf Renaissance,” 524, 541.

¹⁵ Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity*, 1000. Note that she also explicitly states that “the ancient werewolf, like the modern, is very different from the werewolf of medieval romances and entertainment literature.” Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity*, 1000. While it is true that in the high Middle Ages, there was a religious-philosophical discourse, this was minimal, and the major fictional works centering on werewolves seem to have been little impacted by this, if at all. In the early modern period, lycanthropy was associated with witchcraft and supernatural power, and lupine monstrosity was tied to social class conflict and the economic conditions of the time. See also the discussion in Davidson and Canino, “Wolves, Witches, and Werewolves,” 47 and Sconduto, *Metamorphoses of the Werewolf*, 200.

¹⁶ The perhaps most well-known historic werewolf case is that of Peter Stubbe, tried in the fall of 1589 in Cologne. Stubbe was accused of several horrific acts, ranging from rape to cannibalism and lycanthropy, and was subsequently found guilty and executed. Stubbe, it was argued, transformed into a wolf with the devil’s help. See Davidson and Canino, “Wolves, Witches, and Werewolves,” 57–58, 62; Willem De Blécourt, “The Werewolf, the Witch, and the Warlock: Aspects of Gender in the Early Modern Period,” in *Witchcraft and Masculinities in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Alison Rowlands (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2009), 195. Following Stubbe’s case, several werewolf trials occurred in France, Germany, and Switzerland in the seventeenth century. Authors of (anti-)witchcraft literature found werewolf cases particularly fascinating and explored them at length. See Davidson and Canino, “Wolves, Witches, and Werewolves,” 159–60. See also Heinrich Kramer (*Malleus Maleficarum*, 1486) and the King James Bible. Both were feeding on the fear of witches but rejected the possibility of actual transformation into wolves. Sconduto, *Metamorphoses of the Werewolf*, 128–29, 200; Aleksander Pluskowski, *Wolves and the Wilderness in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2006), 192. Jean Bodin, who impacted the witch craze tremendously with his

later stage, the werewolf *mayse* is firmly grounded in the medieval European story tradition: a courtly setting (albeit only in the second part), a supportive king, a domesticated wolf who becomes a loyal companion to a king, and a treacherous woman. But an important difference between the medieval werewolf tales and the early modern *mayse* stands out: the heroes of the medieval tales are nobles while the *mayse*'s hero is not a knight but a rabbi. Courtly behavior, including benevolence and moral role modeling, is transformed into rabbinical leadership, which, more than in any of the other tales, includes responsibilities for a large group of others (students). The image of the knight has been replaced by a person who surpasses a knight within a Jewish context in his exemplary moral and behavioral function.

Many adaptations of entertaining literature in Yiddish demonstrate that Jews shared their Christian neighbors' fascination with knights and tales about knightly adventures. The Arthurian romance *Viduvilt* (fourteenth century) — based on the Middle High German romance by Wirnt of Grafenberg (thirteenth century) — stands out as it produced several subsequent Yiddish editions and adaptations.¹⁷ This Jewish fascination with knighthood was not restricted to a literary sphere; evidence suggests that a few sword-bearing Jews may have been knights themselves.¹⁸ But, in reality, knighthood was also tied to frequent anti-Jewish violence, the Crusades being the most famous example, and, therefore, frequently represented in a Jewish context as flawed and associated with violent excess. The Hebrew romance *Melekh Artus*, based on the medieval Lancelot-Grail cycle, radically departs from a heroic or virtuous rendering of knights, instead representing the court and the fellowship of the Round Table as devious, vengeful, and excessively violent.¹⁹

Despite relying heavily on the medieval literary werewolf tradition, the author of the werewolf *mayse* removes the complicated discourse on knightly character in a Jewish context by choosing a rabbi as the protagonist. This change represents not just an insignificant divergence from medieval stories but rather the key to understanding the story as it directly impacts how the rabbi is portrayed and perceived. The mythological werewolf figure is marked by instability and transgression as it embodies contested space and the unstable boundary between wolves and humans in a single creature,²⁰ with Lycaon serving as the most famous representative of the human-wolf transformation and giving it its name, “lycanthropy” (whether “real” or imagined). According to tales circulating in

Demonomanie (1580), also included a section on werewolves. De Blécourt, “The Werewolf, the Witch, and the Warlock,” 195.

¹⁷ Annegret Oehme, “*Viduvilt*. The Yiddish World of Arthur,” in *The Arthurian World*, ed. Miriam Edlich-Muth, Renée Ward, and Victoria Coldham-Fussell (New York: Routledge, 2022), 241-55.

¹⁸ Christine Magin, “Armed Jews in Legal Sources from the High and Late Middle Ages,” *Jewish Studies* 41 (2002): 67-81; Markus J. Wenninger, “Von jüdischen Rittern und anderen waffentragenden Juden im mittelalterlichen Deutschland,” *Aschkenas* 13 (2003): 35-82; Emily Taitz, *The Jews of Medieval France: The Community of Champagne* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press 1994).

¹⁹ Caroline Gruenbaum, “A Not-So-Unique Text: *Melekh Artus* and Medieval Jewish Arthurian Romance,” in *The Arthurian World*, ed. Miriam Edlich-Muth, Renée Ward, and Victoria Coldham-Fussell (New York: Routledge, 2022), 227-240; Rella Kushelevsky, “*Melekh Artus* as a Jewish Romance: Horizons of Expectation and Genre Configurations,” in *Medieval and Early Modern Jewish Romance*, ed. Caroline Gruenbaum and Annegret Oehme (Leeds: Arc Humanities Press, 2023), 107-28.

²⁰ This idea is likely based on the fact that humans and wolves are the closest predators to one another in many regions, competing for the same land and food resources. Carla Freccero, “A Race of Wolves,” *Yale French Studies* no. 127 (2015), 112-16.

antiquity, Lycaon, the mythical king of Arcadia, was so wicked that he had a human cooked and served to the gods to test them. Zeus punished the king by transforming him into a wolf. The medieval reception of the story grew due to a renewed interest in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which included this tale, among other shapeshifting stories.²¹

The werewolf *mayse* relies on this widespread understanding of a werewolf as a border dweller, a creature that erodes the boundary not only between human and animal but also between nature and culture, civilized and wild, forest and court.²² This concept is then applied to the rabbi, who is portrayed as a figure in similarly contested social spaces, a person who belongs to many places and yet is nowhere fully integrated. The rabbi's extensive knowledge and abilities, which constitute his main strengths, allow him to transgress physical spaces (his town and other towns), social spaces (king and rabbi), religious spaces (Christian and Jewish), and creatural spaces (human and animal); they are also the features that mark him as a singular being and that separate him from those around him. The rabbi multiplies and diversifies the identity of the border dweller because of the additional boundaries he transgresses.²³ Placing the rabbi in this *mayse* as the protagonist suggests an interpretation of his position as equally unstable and contested. Despite being central to his community, he is separated from the others who are not his equal, marked by his singular status, which is captured in his ability to read and understand not just all the world's languages but also the non-verbal signs in the world.

Literacy, Magic, and Liminality

The rabbi's linguistic abilities set him apart from his knightly predecessors in the literary tradition who lack the ability to communicate in their werewolf state and are otherwise also not marked as particularly well-versed in various languages. In the related medieval stories, the noble werewolves do not speak; they communicate their humanity through non-verbal actions.²⁴ For example, while Marie de France's

²¹ Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity*, 993. Besides Ovid, books about the natural world, such as the *Physiologus* (second century BCE) and Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae* (ca. 600-625), further influenced the discourse (Pluskowski, *Wolves and the Wilderness in the Middle Ages*, 118, 128). But the Jewish discourse also relies on biblical sources, specifically Genesis 49:27 (JPS): "Benjamin is a ravenous wolf," which medieval interpreters understood as a sign that Jacob's youngest son Benjamin was a proto-werewolf. Shyovitz, "Christians and Jews in the Twelfth-Century Werewolf Renaissance," 527-29.

²² The wolf itself represents a classic outsider trope that is symbolized by the werewolf, a notion Plautus, and subsequently Thomas Hobbes, capture in the famous phrase "homo homini lupus." Cf. Peter Arnds, *Lycanthropy in German Literature* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 13; Jay Geller, *Bestiarium Judaicum: Unnatural Histories of the Jews* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), 190. It has been subsequently featured in the political discussions of outsiderdom in political theory. Cf. Geller, *Bestiarium Judaicum*, 12; Freccero, "A Race of Wolves," 116.

²³ The myth marks the human Lycaon as an outsider within his community through his cruel, inhuman acts; his wolfish identity matches his behavior and is related to the act of murdering his son and serving him to the gods. The transformation into a wolf is not just a punishment but also a fulfillment. The wolfish identity marks Lycaon as an outsider – expelled by the gods from human society. His "human exile," however, is permanent without the potential of return, a key aspect that differentiates Lycaon from the courtly werewolves of the medieval stories. Cf. Arnds, *Lycanthropy in German Literature*, 15; Geller, *Bestiarium Judaicum*, 191.

²⁴ Judith Klinger mentions a wolf (not werewolf) that is capable of writing in runes, which are, within the story, equal to hidden words. Judith Klinger, "Der Wolf: Vernichter, Wächter, Schattenbruder," in *Tiere. Begleiter des Menschen in der Literatur des Mittelalters*, ed. Judith Klinger and Andreas Kraß (Weimar and Vienna: Böhlau, 2017), 139-61.

Bisclavret is in “full possession of his agency”²⁵ and his “actions reflect his deliberate and conscientious adherence to the dictates of the rational and ethical inner ‘man,’”²⁶ he cannot use speech in any form — he has to rely on physical actions (e.g., biting off his wife’s nose).²⁷ In contrast, the rabbi is a multilingual genius. The audience learns early in the tale that the rabbi knows seventy languages, a quality stressed even before his kindness and generosity. The rabbinic-Talmudic concept of knowing seventy languages refers to Genesis 10:1-30, in which the descendants of Noah’s sons are listed, with the popular interpretation that each eventually came to represent a different language. Underscoring this linguistic flexibility, one manuscript even adds that the rabbi knew the language of animals.²⁸

The rabbi’s literacy is, moreover, directly linked with transformations: the ring containing the written secret causes him to become trapped in the wolf’s body, and the written words in the snow enable him to return to his human form. In fact, the written word enables both the first transformation, the confinement in the wolfish body, and the second transformation, which represents the rabbi’s salvation.²⁹ While the transformation from man to wolf was tied, even in early werewolf stories, to an explicit boundary crossing—water had to be crossed, clothes removed or put on, or magic and charms used—the werewolf *mayse* relies on the written word for this boundary crossing.³⁰ The rabbi transforms into a werewolf through a fairytale element, a magic ring that can fulfill any wish. This magical ability is accessible only to the finder who can read the inscription and subsequently draws the right conclusions.

At first glance, the ring seems “worthless” (ניקש ווערט). It shares its true value only with the person able to read and understand its inscription: אוב איד שון שלעכט אן צו זעהן בין זא קיין מיר מיד דוך ניט בצאלין (176r) (Even though I am not pretty to look at, I am priceless). The rabbi’s ring relies on a different process from the medieval transformations; it requires its user to read and understand the ring by pondering the meaning of its inscription: דער רב וואר אין גרושר חכם אונ גידאכט עז מוש איין ביזונדרן טויאר (176r) (The rabbi was a great scholar; he thought that the ring must have special powers, and he started to consider all possibilities imaginable).³¹ The wolf who can express himself in human language is thus a result of a magic object that reacts to the power of language. Magic and language are intertwined here as they share the power to transform and create in a way that some Jewish and Christian kabbalists had dreamed about.³² The written

²⁵Gilmore, “Marie de France’s *Bisclavret*,” 77.

²⁶ Gilmore, “Marie de France’s *Bisclavret*,” 76.

²⁷ One possible interpretation of the name Bisclavret is “speaking wolf,” thus making speaking synonymous with the human part of the werewolf, albeit only one aspect of the human form. Similarly, Gerald of Wales presents seemingly speaking werewolves that turn out to be humans, underscoring the cognitive ability of language as key human trait. Cf. Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity*, 1011.

²⁸ Idelson-Shein, “Kill the Hen That Crows Like a Cock,” 338.

²⁹ Note that the narrator stresses the element of writing throughout his story, emphasizing that storytelling is writing.

³⁰ Sconduto, *Metamorphoses of the Werewolf*, 13. Peter Stubbe, supposedly, had been given a magic belt by a woman that turned him into a wolf. Cf. Geller, *Bestiarium Judaicum*, 191.

³¹ Note that what also qualifies the rabbi is knowledge of not strictly religious stories as he considers this object the magic ring that people talk about (176r).

³² Note that the *Hasidei Ashkenaz*, who were fascinated by the werewolf concept, also discussed Kabbalistic ideas about the transformative power of the written word.

word and the ability to understand many languages become both a blessing and a curse to the rabbi.

The language that is key to rabbinical identity in the *mayse* is Hebrew. Despite knowing seventy languages, the rabbi chooses to compose his desperate message in the language of the Torah and in a language that sets him apart even within his community. While especially the male members of the Jewish community would have been able at least to quote some Hebrew, few would have possessed advanced Hebrew proficiency.³³ Even within the smaller community of the yeshiva, only a few very dedicated Torah students would have reached a level of Hebrew proficiency that would have enabled them to read and understand Talmudic or halakhic (legal) texts.³⁴ The rabbi's language for teaching his students would have been Yiddish.³⁵ While Hebrew was the highly regarded holy language and central to daily Jewish prayers, Chava Turniansky explains that Yiddish was ultimately the key language through which the large majority of Jews accessed even religious and halakhic teachings.³⁶ In medieval and early modern Europe, Hebrew was rarely used as more than the language of ritual, except by a small number of learned Jewish men who actively studied religious-halakhic texts.³⁷

Trapped in the wolfish body, the rabbi decides to communicate his story through written Hebrew words. The spectators are initially baffled, but the king's advisor recognizes the language despite its aura of mystery. Not completely surprisingly, the counselor finds a person who identifies the language. After all, Hebrew was also a language known and studied by a number of Christians. The hidden and even magical element of Hebrew that is captured in the concept of *gematria* (a numerology in which Hebrew letters are substituted for numbers) appealed to Christian scholars, theologians, linguists, and philosophers, as well as to Christian Kabbalists,³⁸ who were present in both Italian- and German-speaking lands. By the time the *Mayse-bukh* was composed, Hebrew was not just a religious-halakhic language but a language conceived of as having magical qualities.³⁹ The author of the *mayse* plays with the notion that Hebrew serves as a mode of secretive communication for Christians and Jews alike, captured by the idea that Hebrew is a language of paradise and by interest in the lost pronunciations of the Hebrew name of God or in the hidden messages within words. In the *mayse*, Hebrew becomes the language of secrecy but also the language that unveils the

³³ Often Hebrew was seen as the language of Jewish men and Yiddish as the language for women and those who were not fluent in Hebrew. This paradigm has, however, been contested; see e.g., Chava Weissler, "For Women and for Men Who Are Like Women. The Construction of Gender in Yiddish Devotional Literature," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 5, no. 2 (Fall 1989): 7–24; and Diane Wolfthal, *Picturing Yiddish: Gender, Identity, and Memory in the Illustrated Yiddish Books of Renaissance Italy* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 81–82.

³⁴ Chava Turniansky, "Yiddish and the Transmission of Knowledge in Early Modern Europe," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 15, no. 1 (2008): 8.

³⁵ Turniansky, "Yiddish and the Transmission of Knowledge," 7.

³⁶ While religious-halakhic educated authors translated important teachings into Yiddish to make religious knowledge and customs accessible to a non-Hebrew-speaking audience, they also prevented their audiences from accessing texts that could have been too difficult or misunderstood, thus acting as gatekeepers. Cf. Turniansky, "Yiddish and the Transmission of Knowledge," 9, 11–12.

³⁷ Sander L. Gilman, *Jewish Self-Hatred: Anti-Semitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 23.

³⁸ Such as Ramon Llull (c. 1232–1316) or Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–1494).

³⁹ Gilman, *Jewish Self-Hatred*, 24.

secret. At the same time, its accessibility is limited, and it requires an “initiate” to fully uncover the secret of the werewolf.

In the *mayse*, the rabbi is able not only to decipher the ancient language of the ring but also to communicate in Hebrew. The rabbi’s transformation into a werewolf thus doubly highlights his linguistic abilities, which extend far beyond Yiddish. While Yiddish was the everyday language of the Ashkenazi diaspora—frequently called לשון אשכנז (language of Ashkenaz),⁴⁰ though, in a sense, it was also at home in the diaspora as a Germanic language—Hebrew occupied a more circumscribed space, guiding ritual-liturgical aspects of Jewish life and theological-halakhic discourses. While many Jewish men and women could, at some level, recite or read aloud Hebrew-language texts, only a few—predominantly learned men—possessed advanced proficiency in the language.⁴¹ In the *mayse*, Hebrew likewise holds a rarefied position and is truly understood only by a few characters, including the rabbi and the Christian Hebraist who seems not to belong to the court’s elite. The rabbi’s facility with Hebrew distinguishes him from his surroundings, even if he is not fully isolated, both at the Christian court and within the Jewish community. In this regard, the *mayse* underscores the status of Hebrew as a displaced language, an image of diaspora.⁴² This displacement is further signaled by the ephemeral material with which the rabbi eventually writes his message: snow. Both he and the holy language occupy, thereby, liminal and unstable positions. It can thus be argued that the rabbi-werewolf’s position as an outsider is intensified by his linguistic knowledge, allowing the *mayse* to be understood as an allegory of a multilingual, diasporic life.

In the *mayse*, moreover, the rabbi’s linguistic remove is signaled by the fact that the reader of the *mayse* is not granted direct access to the rabbi’s writing, which is only conveyed in Yiddish in the text, thus emphasizing the linguistic boundary between the rabbi and the larger Yiddish-speaking community that constituted the *mayse*’s readership. The rabbi’s command of Hebrew enables him to tell his story, which brings about his salvation from being trapped in a wolf’s body, but it also sets him apart.

Beyond the Word: Non-Verbal Signs

⁴⁰ Turniansky, “Yiddish and the Transmission of Knowledge,” 12-13.

⁴¹ This includes men and women alike. In her book *A Marriage Made in Heaven*, Naomi Seidman has shown at length that while perceived in modernity often as a “feminine” language, Yiddish was indeed the everyday language of men and women alike, with the exception of a very few learned men. Naomi Seidman, *A Marriage Made in Heaven: The Sexual Politics of Hebrew and Yiddish* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2023), esp. 19 and 27.

⁴² Idelson-Shein, “Kill the Hen That Crows Like a Cock: Animal Encounters in Old Yiddish,” 338. Iris Idelson-Shein has argued that Yiddish literature and language occupy an ambivalent and contested space between Hebrew and German (and, in the context of Yiddish literature in Italy, even Italian). She argues that the rabbi’s unstable identity as animal and non-Christian is reflected in the use of Hebrew within a Yiddish text: “Rejecting exile and calling for active deliverance, the Rabbi-Werewolf insists on Hebrew and violence as ways to bring about deliverance and put an end to the translation/transformation conundrum.” Idelson-Shein, “Kill the Hen That Crows Like a Cock,” 344. Astrid Lembke, in contrast, also hints at the positive implications, arguing that, after all, a polyglot advisor enables an exchange between two groups (the Jews and Christians), thus hinting at the general possibility of a dialogue between them. Lembke, “Das unwillige Untier,” 24.

The rabbi's literacy extends beyond the written and spoken word into the non-verbal world which in itself becomes a kind of book that can be read and understood.⁴³ This ability enables him to understand that signs can be manipulated. It is the rabbi, after all, who manipulates visual signs related to economic class to benefit himself and his students. The rabbi's ability to read non-verbal signs and interpret the world surrounding him makes him the perfect recipient of the ring. Much like the Baal Shem Tov in Buber's story, the *mayse's* rabbi is uniquely positioned to understand the reality surrounding him. In Buber's story, the townsfolk see only a wolf while the Baal Shem sees a human heart beating within the wolf.⁴⁴ The rabbi of the *mayse* similarly looks beyond what is visible to the human eye and is not fooled by outward appearance. It is, therefore, easy for him to believe the ring's inscription and assume that its true value is much more than its appearance indicates.

The rabbi knows very well, however, that other people in his community rely heavily on that which is visible and do not question what they see. He uses this knowledge to benefit himself and his *yeshive bokhers* (yeshiva students), manipulating signs for those who trust in that which is visible and rely on appearances. Reduced to poverty by his generosity, the rabbi travels with fifty students and is welcomed everywhere. However, this strategy relies on the deception that the rabbi and his students are still affluent. Relying on the mere appearance of his and his students' wealth, people are happy to welcome the group. Once the visitors' wealth has visibly disappeared, people become immediately less welcoming: שלום מן דיא דיר בור אין צו דען עש וואשט ניט אידרמן איר גילעגן הייט אוב עש לומדים אודר בהורים ווארן (175v) (people closed the door on their faces because they didn't know who they were dealing with, vagabonds or students). The success of the rabbi's undertaking depends on people believing he is wealthy and, thus, on his ability to manipulate the economic signs so they appear the way he wants the townsfolk to perceive them.

In another instance, the townsfolk in the rabbi's hometown are misled by the signs, which, in this case, the *rebbetzin* uses to her benefit. After she turns the rabbi into a werewolf, the locals do not question his absence as they believe he is traveling again as he had done before. The *rebbetzin* herself, however, later falls victim to her own gullibility. Having learned about the rabbi-werewolf's fate, the king promises to retrieve the ring without understanding its magic powers. Dressed as a merchant to avoid garnering attention, the king visits the *rebbetzin*, who does not question the merchant's identity. Her trust highlights that even those who attempt to manipulate outer signs, like the *rebbetzin*, fall victim to their own credulity.⁴⁵

⁴³ While often perceived as a deeply Christian concept – the two-book theory that God's words and will can be found in the holy scriptures and in nature – the imperative to read higher meaning into the surrounding world and perceive nature as manifestations within a monotheistic framework date back to the late antiquity and are key to the *Phyisologus* and the medieval werewolf discourse.

⁴⁴ Buber, *Die Legende des Baal-Schem*, 53.

⁴⁵ The rabbi himself falls victim to credulity on one occasion. The narrator highlights the one moment when the rabbi trusts somebody blindly by sharing the secret of the ring with his wife, seeming to align at this moment with the misogynist moral of the text. The rabbi does not repeat this error of trusting others with the secret of the ring, withholding information when he later tells the king only about its ability to transform humans and not about its other powers. The reason for this omission is repeated twice in the text (179v and 180r): the king himself cannot be trusted: הבלט אביר דער מלך גיוויש הבן דאש דש פינגרליין דיא טונגאנט אן אים העט זא העטש אים דער מלך פאר לייכט ניט געבן (But if the king had known the powers of the ring, he might not have given it to him.) The rabbi's observation indicates that he is learning from the mistake of sharing too much but also underscores that the rabbi uses others' superficial judgments to his own benefit. If he does not reveal hidden truths, the others will not learn

Notably, when the other characters in the *mayse* focus on visible signs, these instances are mostly narrated in the context of wealth and greed. The rabbi and his students are welcomed when they appear rich; the *rebbetzin* dislikes her husband because he generously gives money away. The rabbi's seeming reintegration into the community is based on his wealth and renewed generosity towards his community. The rabbi is portrayed as standing apart from the pervasive greed of the world in which he finds himself; the text registers this by linking wealth with (often misleading) visual representation and the shallowness of much human behavior. The rabbi's relationship with his students is equally flawed and wealth based. While the text implies that the rabbi has many students because of his reputation, they follow him blindly only as long as he is affluent. They want to return home when they realize their funds have run out, and their minds change when the rabbi procures new funding through the ring's magic. Neither his wife nor his students seem to appreciate him fully; they all turn away from him in precarious financial circumstances. When he returns home, the poor people rejoice because they have become dependent on his generosity and suffered in his absence. The fact that his generosity also sets him apart within his community marks the town as deficient; it serves to underscore his solitary status and offers a critique of the lack of tzedakah in his community.

However, out of all these figures, only the *rebbetzin* is punished for her greed, as she was directly responsible for trapping the rabbi in a wolf's body. Her punishment relies on visible signs that, unlike the Hebrew writing in the snow, everyone in the community can read and understand. In an act of almost excessive revenge, the rabbi punishes her by using the ring to turn her into a donkey and forcing her to carry the stones for the new synagogue—a double punishment where the wealth brought by the ring is then returned to the community.⁴⁶ Family and townsfolk plead with him to show mercy and return her to her human state, but the rabbi refuses, and the wife remains trapped in the body of a donkey. While the people could not read the signs that indicated that the wolf was a human until the rabbi himself made it known—in a way that still required interpretation in the form of translation—in the case of the *rebbetzin*, no interpretation is needed as the townsfolk are told that she has been transformed into a donkey as a punishment. The interpretation of signs has been provided for them.

Conclusion

The ability to “read,” interpret, and use verbal and non-verbal signs sets the rabbi apart from his community. He neither loses this ability over the course of the story, nor do the other characters gain these abilities. Therefore, at the end of the *mayse*, the rabbi seems visibly reintegrated into the community, but only at first glance.

about them. This sets the rabbi apart and places him in a powerful outsider position with his unique insight into human shortcomings.

⁴⁶ An unusual choice of animal and punishment—unknown in the other non-Jewish stories—the text might actually reference a story from the Babylonian Talmud in which Rabbi Yannai (seemingly) turns a woman into a donkey (Sanhedrin 67b). Rabbi Yannai asks an innkeeper for water but is given water that had been secretly enchanted by the innkeeper's wife. In an act of revenge, he performs sorcery, and the innkeeper's wife turns (temporarily) into a donkey, which Rabbi Yannai rides to the marketplace, where she returns to human form.

While the narrator never criticizes the rabbi for his treatment of his wife⁴⁷ — in contrast to members of his family and community — and the narrator never presents the rabbi as anything but an excellent and generous scholar,⁴⁸ the rabbi's imperfect and even broken relationships with his wife and students indicate a mutual lack of appreciation and understanding, as well as his persistent isolation within the community.

This fact also sets the werewolf-*mayse* apart within the noble-werewolf tradition. The main figures in Marie de France's text are ultimately restored in their humanness and reintegrated into courtly society, but the rabbi in the *mayse* remains a solitary and isolated figure, never quite resettled in one community or the other. The reasons for this are twofold: all his social roles were already marked as somewhat precarious before his transformation, and he is exceptional in how he understands the world. The rabbi is portrayed as generous and educated, yet his true value is not appreciated by his students or his wife. At the end of the story, the marital situation is not resolved; he is restored to his human state, but his solitude within his community remains.⁴⁹ In medieval stories and religious discourses, depictions of the werewolf frequently highlight what already exists in the nature of the figure before he is transformed into a wolf. In the case of the rabbi werewolf, that is his solitary status. The brief transformation into a wolf did not isolate him more than before but mirrored the social status he already held.

On the surface, the *mayse's* message seems to contain only a traditional misogynist warning against trusting women (177r and 180v). This interpretation would be reinforced if the *mayse* had also stressed that the *yeshive bokhers* speak Hebrew. This is, however, not the case, as the *mayse* only foregrounds the Hebrew proficiency of the rabbi and his story's interpreter. In this way, it can be argued that the Hebrew text remains hidden from the *mayse's* audience regardless of gender. A comparison with another story in the *Mayse-bukh* underscores that the key to understanding the text lies not in the topical misogynist statement but in the focus on language and literacy. Story no. 143, "R. Hanina and the Frog,"⁵⁰ features a speaking frog as a religious educator. This somewhat more fairytale-like story provides a similar symbolic emphasis on language, literacy, and the importance of reading signs correctly in the context of human-animal transformation. Rabbi Hanina buys a silver container at the market as instructed by his father in his will. In the container, he finds a frog that he generously feeds until he himself is impoverished because of the frog's insatiable hunger. The frog then begins to speak and volunteers to teach the rabbi Torah, the language of the animals, and the seventy languages. It turns out that the frog is the lost son of Adam and Adam's first wife who

⁴⁷ While the misogynist narrative of his begrudging wife somewhat exonerates the rabbi, his radical withdrawal from his wife with his students also somewhat diminishes his marital identity. His wife is described as malevolent: אונט קונט ניט וואל ליידן ווען איר איין ארמן מענש אין אביר דער גיגן האט דער רב איין ביז ווייב [...] אונט קונט ניט וואל ליידן ווען איר איין ארמן מענש אין אביר דער גיגן האט דער רב איין ביז ווייב [...] (175r) (On the other hand, the rabbi had a very mean wife [...]. She couldn't stand to have a poor person in her house). Thus, by traveling with his students, the rabbi attempts to realize an escapist fantasy that removes him from the marital space. See also Lembke, "Das unwillige Untier," 19.

⁴⁸ Note that the text repeats the rabbi's service to religion. He encourages and enables his students to study the Talmud (175r) and even funds a synagogue with his wealth (180v).

⁴⁹ Lembke, "Das unwillige Untier," 2, and Shyovitz, "Christians and Jews in the Twelfth-Century Werewolf Renaissance," 533.

⁵⁰ English title from Moses Gaster, *Ma'aseh Book: Book of Jewish Tales and Legends*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1934), 349-60.

possesses the explicitly God-given ability to shapeshift.⁵¹ While the frog does not play a role in the second half of the story, the now well-educated rabbi eventually marries the king's daughter and succeeds the king on the throne.

The reliance on speaking animals allows the audience of both *mayse*s to reflect on the social, religious, and political significance of language(s) and literacy. Both the shapeshifting frog and the werewolf rabbi possess a depth of linguistic knowledge that surpasses that of anybody else in their realm—a knowledge that, in both cases, goes hand in hand with rabbinical-Talmudic expertise. A key difference between the stories lies in the fact that the frog's story is set in the land of Israel, so the king is Jewish and not Christian. The werewolf rabbi, on the other hand, navigates the religious-cultural landscape of a small Jewish community within the diaspora. Rather than striving for a new life, he returns to his old life as a rabbi in his town but retains his outsider status. Refusing to show mercy to his wife when faced with opposition from his family and townsfolk underlines the rabbi's isolated position in the community; by the end of the story, family and friends show no empathy for him but criticize him for his treatment of his wife.

The rabbi himself becomes a symbol for the solitary status of an individual through the specific use of wolf imagery. In Christian discourse, Jews have been perceived as outsiders of lupine identity since at least St. John Chrysostom, who described them as “more dangerous than any wolves.”⁵² The Old Yiddish text reclaims this wolfish idea for the newly chosen figure of the rabbi as an outsider in both Christian and Jewish communities. His education, which allows him to comprehend hidden truths and understand many languages, sets him apart and serves as both a blessing and a curse. Beyond the seemingly foregrounded misogynistic moral of the *mayse*, readers are also presented, through the difficult-to-read figures of the ring and the werewolf, with a moral that aligns with the Talmudic teaching that a “blessing is found only in an object that is hidden from the eye” (Ta'anit 8b). In this story, language- and word-based literacy are the keys to revealing deep truths invisible to the human eye. The ring is connected to the werewolf in that neither indicates its true identity upon first glance. Only through the power of words do they reveal their inner truths: the ring through its inscribed and coded message and the werewolf through Hebrew writing.

The text also departs from the medieval tradition in the way it presents the act of shapeshifting: the transformation relies on words not on clothes. The text ascribes magic to the written word, an idea that would have been familiar to medieval and early modern Jewish audiences, considering the rich tradition of offering protection via religious-magical objects that drew their strength from the written Hebrew word, in particular from the name of God. The practice of “writing amulets” was common in Jewish tradition in the Middle Ages.⁵³ The rabbi's proficiency in all languages of

⁵¹ Note that this shows a radically different take on the ability to transform than in the contemporaneous Christian witchcraft context. Kramer mentions the ability of witches to transform into frogs in his *Malleus Maleficarum*.

⁵² Geller, *Bestiarium Judaicum*, 193. Vespasianus Rehtanus claims in his 1606 *Juden Spiegel* (Mirror of Jews) that Jews were even more violent than wolves. Cf. Geller, *Bestiarium Judaicum*, 194.

⁵³ The most familiar example for the employment of word magic besides such amulets is the Golem, who comes to life when a piece of paper containing the name of God in Hebrew is put in his mouth. While the Golem only became a popular figure in the nineteenth century, the earliest concept of a Golem goes back to the Talmud (Tractate Sanhedrin 38b, 65b) and featured passages from the *Sefer Yetzirah* (Book of Creation), a foundational text for the Hasidei Ashkenaz. On early concepts of magic and the written and spoken word, see Mika Ahuvia, “Popular Religion and Magic: Early Judaism,” in

the world, gives him access to an even magical power that exceeds a mere understanding of words. The lack of language of the medieval werewolves and the rabbi-werewolf is then not just a minor difference but rather encapsulates the radical divergence from the medieval tradition enabled by replacing the knight with a rabbi. The change of protagonist enables the *mayse's* author to tell a radically different story from its predecessors, one that relies on literacy with regard to languages and the surrounding world. It is through the figure of the rabbi that the author can tell such a story—much as Buber's story of the Baal Shem needed a *tzadik* (wise man) to reveal what is hidden.

The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and Gender Studies, ed. Julia M. O'Brien (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 77–82; Gideon Bohak, "Jewish Amulets, Magic Bowls, and Manuals in Aramaic and Hebrew," in *Guide to the Study of Ancient Magic*, ed. David Frankfurter (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 388–415; and Michael D. Schwartz, *Scholastic Magic: Ritual and Revelation in Early Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).