



Match-Making Magic among Medieval French Jews

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To know whether a certain man will marry a certain woman and what will be their fate if he will marry her: Go and calculate his name along with hers and add to the amount ו,י [16] and take out¹ ט,ט [9, again and again]. If the remainder is ט [9] he won't marry her, and if he will marry her they will not succeed; and if ז,ז ² – the sign of Venus, and [therefore] it is good, redemption and pleasure will be between them; and if ב [2] – the sign of Mars, [therefore] bad luck, hate, fighting, and jealousy will be between them; and if ג [3] – that is the hate, a[nd] and if ד [4] – the sign of Mercury, [therefore] they will love each other, but their livelihood will be far;³ and if ה [5] – the sign of Jupiter, [therefore] both good and bad between them; and if ו [6] –

1 Meaning: "divide by."

2 If the remainder is 1.

3 Financial struggle.

the sign of Saturn, [therefore] a terrible tragedy will happen between the[m] and if \uparrow [7] they must not be together, so they will not become widowed; and if ה [8] [he will marry] the daughter of an outstanding famil[y] and great love will be between them⁴

Isaac son of Isaac, Chinon, France, c.1250

Love and marriage have always been among the great human concerns. And no wonder – for what could have more of an impact on one’s life than one’s life partner? One means for influencing the success of a marriage was magic. The text cited above is an example of magical practice, aimed at determining the fate of a match. It is found in a French manuscript copied not long before the expulsion of the Jews from France (1306). More than 250 pages of spells, incantations, magical recipes, and rituals were recorded in this tiny book, about the size of a deck of cards (fig. 1). The owner of the book was a man named Isaac son of Isaac, who lived in the French city of Chinon around 1250. Isaac copied many of the recipes in his own hand, including the one translated above.

This incantation is based on a Jewish practice known as *gematria* [גימטריה]: an alphanumeric code that assigns a numerical value to the letters of a name, word, or phrase. It instructs users to sum the numerical value of the bride and groom’s names, to add sixteen to the amount, then subtract nine repeatedly (which is equivalent to dividing by nine), until left with a remainder between one and nine (meaning – no remainder at all, a number that can be divided by nine).

Numerology is the study of the divine or mystical meaning of numbers, illustrated in the recipe above. It is deeply connected to astrology – the study of the movements and relative positions of celestial objects in order to decipher divine information about human affairs and terrestrial events. In Isaac’s formula, the remainder left from the calculation of names represents a planet, and a certain destiny; the number 1 represents Venus, indicating a lucky and loving match; while a remainder of five represents Jupiter, meaning a mediocre relationship with many ups and downs.

Let us take, as an example, perhaps the most famous couple in the Hebrew Bible, that of Abraham and Sarah. To determine the luck of this match, one would first calculate the numerical value of the names "Abraham" and "Sarah":

Abraham 248 = 40 + 5 + 200 + 2 + 1 :[אברהם]

Sarah 505 = 5 + 200 + 300 :[שרה]

Therefore, Abraham and Sarah = 248 + 505 = 753

To the result, the user then adds sixteen: 753 + 16 = 769

The next step is dividing the amount – in this case 769 – by nine, until left with a remainder between one and nine:

$769 / 9 = 85$ (remainder = 4)

Finally, we can decipher the destiny of Abraham and Sarah: the remainder of the numerical value of their names is 4, a number related to the sign of Mercury: "*and if ד [4] – the sign of Mercury, [therefore] they will love each other, but their livelihood will be far.*" Indeed, the story

4 Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ms. héb. 633, fol. 124v.

of the biblical couple includes times of hunger and poverty, besides a complicated, yet loving, relationship.

What can a magical practice like this teach us about match-making in medieval Ashkenaz? How did Isaac, or his community, use magical practices and recipes, and how did such rituals manifest themselves in their everyday life? One answer to those questions can be found in the stars. In medieval Europe, the celestial sphere, and especially the planets within the solar system, were considered to have significant influence on earth, the human body, and one's fate and character. Astrological signs were associated with times of the year, days of the week, and even specific hours; with the four elements of creation – earth, air, water, and fire; and with medicine. During the Middle Ages, technologies and practices were developed in order to benefit from the power of astrological signs and celestial bodies, in both personal and communal events, and to ensure good luck for the user.

In Jewish tradition, the relation between luck and astrological signs is even more straightforward, since the words "luck" and "star" are identical: *mazal*. To have good luck was to have a good astrological map or the celestial sphere behind you. The wish for good luck and lucky opportunities was particularly present at weddings. The crucial moment when the destiny of two people

was tied together for the rest of their lives, and the very beginning of a new family, created a rich tradition where every detail was packed with significance. Ashkenazic weddings were often scheduled for Friday morning, "the day of Venus," especially lucky for matters of the heart; and astral marks associated with love, luck, and fertility were painted upon the couple's *chuppah* [חופה], the canopy under which a Jewish couple stood during their wedding ceremony. Moreover, a *Hup-pastein* (marriage stone) was often installed in the synagogue, carved in stone with a star alongside the blessing "mazal tov." At the end of the wedding ceremony, the groom would toss a glass full of wine at the star in order to protect the wedding and the marriage from demons and evil forces. Sometimes, the groom even engaged his bride with a "mazal tov ring."

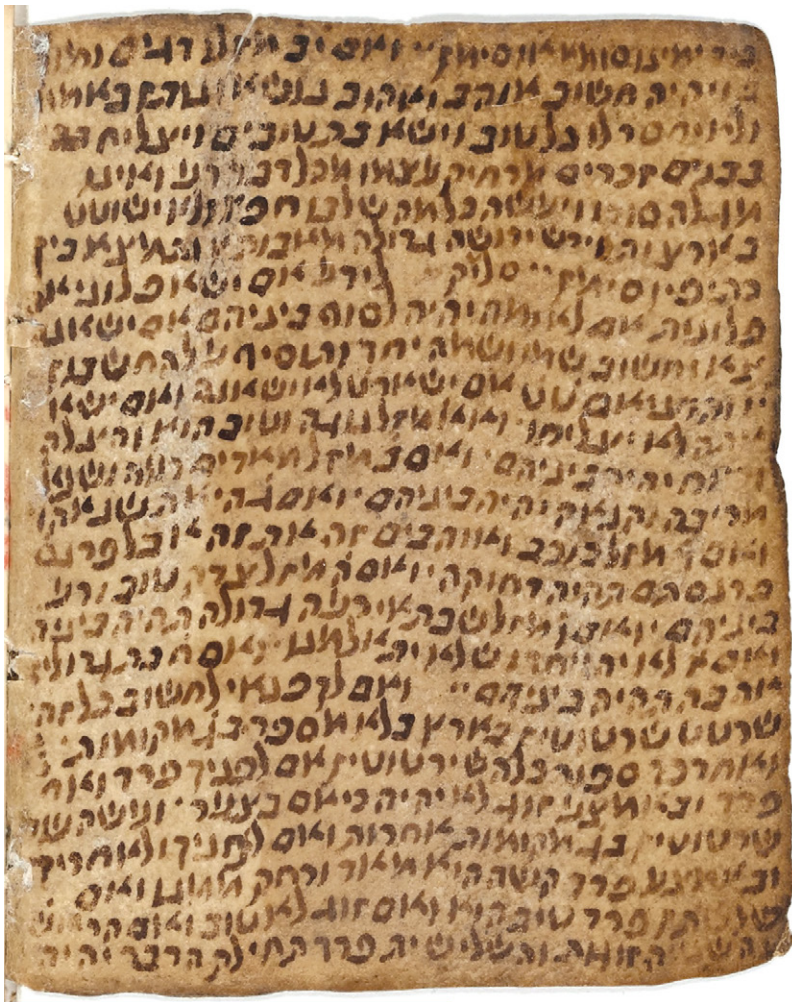


Fig. 1. Miscellany of spells, incantations, magical recipes, and rituals. Isaac son of Isaac, Chinon, France, c.1250. Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS héb. 633, fol. 124v.

The blessing *mazal tov* was a pun meaning both "congratulations" and "good luck," as well as "have a good [astrological] sign." Immediately after the groom gave his bride her ring, the guests shouted "mazal tov!" That is no coincidence, of course: the bride's reception of her wedding ring marked the first moment of couplehood. Accordingly, it was imperative that, at this very moment, luck be everywhere: it should be seen and heard by the entire universe, including by any problematic forces like demons that might be interested in interrupting the event. The custom of wedding guests proclaiming "mazal tov!" dates to the thirteenth century and is mentioned in *Sefer HaNiyyar* (The Paper Book), an anonymous French halakhic text:

...And the custom was, when the public entered [the wedding], to summon witnesses for the betrothal ceremony and show them the betrothal ring... and the groom would say '[by accepting this ring] you will become my exclusive spouse according to the customs of Moses and Israel,' and the guests answer "mazal tov!"

Luck, then, for medieval Jews, came in many shapes and practices: material culture associated with signs and celestial bodies; times and dates; blessing; and even magic. All combined in the effort of ensuring the couple's future.

Whether couples made use of the match-making formulas found in Isaac of Chinon's book, or if this ritual influenced users' decisions about future matches, is lost to history. We do know, however, that good luck was one of the parameters considered in matches in Isaac's cultural context. The Ashkenazic public maintained a belief in the power of astrological signs, luck, magical recipes, and popular rituals, and took great pains to leverage these tools for the benefit of themselves and their loved ones.

Further Reading

- ❖ Gideon Bohak, "Jewish Magic in the Middle Ages." In *The Cambridge History of Magic and Witchcraft in the West: From Antiquity to the Present*, edited by David J. Collins, 268–99. Cambridge History Ebook Collection. 2015.
- ❖ Ortal Paz Saar, *Jewish Love Magic: From Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages*. Leiden: Brill, 2017.
- ❖ Shalom Sabar, "Words, Images, and Magic: The Protection of the Bride and Bridegroom in Jewish Marriage Contracts." In *Jewish Studies at the Crossroads of History and Anthropology: Authority, Diaspora, Tradition*, edited by Ra'anan S. Boustan, Oren Kosansky, and Marina Rustow, 102–32. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011.
- ❖ David I. Shyovitz, *A Remembrance of His Wonders: Nature and the Supernatural in Medieval Ashkenaz*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017.
- ❖ Colette Sirat, "Un rituel juif de France: le manuscrit hébreu 633 de la Bibliothèque nationale de Paris," *Revue des études juives* 119 (1961): 7-40.