The printed Hebrew book as a talisman and ritual object : a historical and bibliographical study in Sefer Raziel ha-malakh and its editions / David Hanegbi

Abstract

The goal of this work on the history of the Hebrew book is to understand and describe the phenomenon in which a physical book becomes invested with the attributes of a charm which in turn, turns it into an amulet, and the investigation of other expressions of this phenomenon in the history of the Hebrew book.

This work touches on other academic fields including history and the bibliography of practical kabbalah and folk medicine, kabbalistic literature, the study of amulets, and the history and ethnography of the leading figures in medicine and magic. However, it is unique in highlighting the phenomenon of charm attached to the physical copy of a book and in the rich description of this phenomenon as seen via a representative case study. This work will focus on the case study of *The Book of Razi'el ha-Malakh* (Raziel the Angel) which was published in Amsterdam, 1701. *Razi'el ha-Malakh* is best known for the charm associated with it which kept its owners safe from fire and other hazards. In addition, it was also used to protect women in labor and the sick. Over time, *Razi'el ha-Malakh* became entirely associated with the charm tradition and was primarily used as an amulet and ceremonial object. The need and great demand for the book led to the printing of many varied and repeated editions of the books, so much so that it is one of the most published books in the history of the Hebrew book; more than 55 editions of the book have been published.

The Book of Razi'el ha-Malakh was chosen as a case study for this work because it is a clear and quality representative of the phenomenon of attributing charm to a physical book. The Present research unfolds an overarching view of a charm tradition over 300 years old, that was spread over a geographic range from Western Europe to Eastern Europe, through India, Greece, the Land of Israel and all the way to America.

The first chapter of this Thesis is a methodological introduction in which the goals and research questions as well as the methodologies used are presented. Many various subjects are touched upon in the course of this study. However, the description and investigation of the phenomenon of charm books that serve as amulets constitutes as the main thread of the work. The framework of this study is bibliographic, with a focus on *The Book of Razi'el ha-Malakh*. The history of the book in its many editions,

in its historical and social context, belongs to the discipline known as “book and society”. This area of study seeks to understand historical and social processes through the study of literature and the cohorts of authors and readers engaged in it.

The second chapter presents the general phenomenon of charm books in general, and specifically, the use of those books as amulets and ceremonial objects. This chapter describes the religious and cultural context in which the phenomenon of using a book as an amulet developed. The place of the book and holy texts in the culture of the Hebrew book and religious practice, play a significant role in the development of charms, specifically in light of kabbalistic and Hassidic attitudes regarding the power of Hebrew letters and words. And so, new ideas from the field of cultural studies are suggested in order to understand how charm books came to be infused with holiness and charm. The books reside in a complicated place, on the border of the religious norm. The attitudes toward them and their practical and religious uses fluctuate between hesitation and inclusion.

The third and fourth chapters are dedicated to the case study of *The Book of Razi'el ha-Malakh*. This chapter focuses on the book itself: its content, structure and the history of its first edition in Amsterdam, 1701. The Amsterdam edition stemmed from its publishers' fervent Sabbatean belief, who intended to publicly reveal the secrets of the Torah. Additionally, the publishers also wanted to ensure that the book would sell, and the charm tradition was created, not by a small measure, due to these commercial motivations. The fact that the book was published from a manuscript had ramifications for the text of the work, which was not uniform in its manuscript form and also solidified the tradition regarding the charm attributed to the book.

The Third chapter also discusses the way the book was infused with extra-textual charm and holiness, expressed in the use of the physical copies of the book for ritual readings without comprehension, and for the most part for protection as an amulet. An in-depth look at the book and its history reveals a few of the reasons the charm tradition was associated with it and the rise in the non-textual use of the book. My claim is that the difficulty in understanding the text and its non-uniform structure, together with the injunctions against it and the hesitation against using it, strengthened the non-textual value of the book and led to alternative methods for its use as an amulet and object.

Another thread in the discussion revolves around the text, the content of the book and the para-text that accompanies it. The textual, visual and cultural para-texts serve as

mediating agents between the books and its readers and may reveal the cultural and historical context in which they were published. In the case of the charm books, whose content was copied again and again without changing, the place of the para-text is crucial, since it serves as a mediating agent, which is constantly adjusting to the changes of time and place

This chapter discusses the attitudes toward *The Book of the Razi'el ha-Malakh* throughout its history. In addition, it tracks the charm tradition that was attributed to it and its traces in rabbinic literature and other outside sources. A special place is dedicated to the interesting case wherein the names of the printing agents in 1701 (including Leib Ben Sara) were published within the text of the charms and prayers in the book itself, and the implications of this addition in later eras.

The fourth chapter continues the investigation into the editions of *The Book of Razi'el ha-Malakh*, and surveys the later editions of the book, from the second edition printed in Grodno, 1793, until now. This chapter describes the 55 editions and printings of the book, some of which have unique and original content and some of which are unchanged. The issues that arose in the first edition - the tension between the view of the book as a text and an amulet, the limitations placed on the use of the book as well as the charm tradition, return and come up in the editions over the years and are expressed and resolved in various ways.

The organization of the editions of *Razi'el ha-Malakh* has bibliographic implications. It is of aid in the investigation of the similarities and differences between the editions, as well as the genealogical analysis of the connections between them, specifically in light of the many editions and the difficulty in orienting oneself within the text. This chapter presents the story of one Hebrew book, first printed over 300 years ago in the various Jewish communities from a “bird’s eye view”. From the aftermath of the Sabbatean movement in the 18th century, through the phenomenon of *Baalei Shem* and the demand for charm and medical literature and the rise of the Hassidic movement, to the modern time. The history of the book runs parallel to the changes that were occurring in the Hebrew book industry: the decline of the publishing centers in central Europe and the rise of the new publishing centers in the east, the technical developments in the book industry and the transition to new publishing centers in the United States and the Land of Israel during the 20th century.

The conclusion and arguments seek to add to the foundation laid down by the analysis of the case study, and deal with the general phenomenon of books that serve as

amulets. The analysis of *The Book of Razi'el ha-Malakh* brings to light the attributes of charm books and amulet books. My assertion is that those attributes are not exclusively unique to this book. They are discerned in other books that share the charm phenomenon, even those that do not clearly belong to the genre. In this chapter we point out certain attributes - both content based and visual - that identify a given book as a book of charms. Among these attributes are the nature of the composition, its title, its anonymous authorship and other information related to the source of the book. Non-textual attributes such as the lack of typographical uniformity, the shape of the letters and the size of the volume are further characteristics of this genre.

The historical-bibliographical research of the first edition and the survey of the various editions of *Razi'el ha-Malakh*, unfold a vivid picture of the history of one of the most famous and widespread Hebrew charm books. The study of The Book of *Razi'el ha-Malakh* presents the phenomenon of charm books which serve as amulets. The research clarifies the processes through which charm books are created and the means by which they form a significant place in the history of the Hebrew book and Jewish society.

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