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Book Review: Rav Hisda's Daughter, Book 1: Apprentice: A Novel of Love, the Talmud, and Sorcery

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Anton, Maggie. *Rav Hisda's Daughter, Book 1: Apprentice: a Novel of Love, the Talmud, and Sorcery*. New York: Plume, 2012.

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Like Milton Steinberg's *As A Driven Leaf*, which brings to life the dramatic life of Elisha ben Abuyah (or "Aher," the Other one, as he is frequently referred to in the Talmud) one of four rabbis of the Mishnaic period (first century CE) who visited the Orchard (that is, *pardes* or paradise in Hebrew) and later became a Greek philosopher and apostate from Judaism, this historical novel by Maggie Anton attempts to bring to life the social context of a woman named Hisdadukh, the daughter of the prominent sage of the Babylonian Talmud known as Rav Hisda.ⁱ Anton's novel is imaginative, educational, well-written, well-researched, enchanting, riveting, engrossing, suspense-filled, and engaging. Anton invites the reader into a pivotal part of Jewish history that changed the Jewish world irreversibly in its redaction of the Babylonian Talmud. She also provides the imagined lives of strong women who served as mothers, wives, and daughters of elite male sages of the time. It is a learned women's world that includes sorcery, amulets, magic incantation bowls, spells, curses, warding off demons, necromancy, and conjurations. Anton weaves together Talmudic *aggadic* lore, ancient Jewish magic, and a timeless enduring eternal love story set in 4th century Babylonia.

While Anton's trilogy novels *Rashi's Daughters* is written in the third person, the point of view of Rav Hisda's daughter is in the first person, and perspective of the story is that of a passionate and courageous woman named Hisdadukh. She is no ordinary person as she is given the dramatic choice of two bridegrooms under dramatic circumstances and boldly declares to her father that she wants both suitors based on Bava Batra 12b. This desire prophetically comes to fruition as her first husband dies, and she ends up marrying the second suitor, the great sage Rava. Anton paints a portrait of a hero who champions women's independence, and freedom to choose whom she wants. Anton takes the reader on a journey of Hisdadukh who is an independent-minded woman that finds fellowship amongst other women who are involved in the production of magic incantation bowls. Anton brings from the margins to center stage the wives, mothers, and

daughters of Talmudic sages at the time of the Babylonian Talmud and builds imagined details that are only hinted within Rabbinic texts. These texts can be regarded as patriarchal works of law and lore, often passing over the women. Anton re-creates and re-imagines Talmudic times with focus on both the ordinary life of her protagonist Hisdadukh as a backdrop to the more well known issues that occupied the Rabbinic men who debated points of rabbinic law. Anton's masterfully weave of multiple Talmudic sources creates a vivid imagined picture of what life might have been like for the daughter of a prominent Rabbinic family in Sasanian Babylonia and Roman Palestine in the late 3rd century, dove tailed by a love story, tragic loss, and one woman's quest and yearning to find a *raison d'etre* and her place in a male-dominated world. Not only is this a coming of age story of a young woman in 3rd century Babylonia whose faith evolves and matures, but Anton seeks to expose the limitations of male-dominated rabbinic society by allowing her protagonist to cultivate knowledge in the occult ancient magic practice of making incantation bowls. In the course of the novel the reader gains insights into the Jewish world of 3rd-4th century for instance with Anton's acute descriptions of Jewish life in Babylonian and Jewish communities in Israel to which her protagonist travels. Insights are also cast regarding debates in Jewish law on a host of topics from vegetable storage, betrothal, and marriage, to the laws of Pesach. Anton shows how these arguments offer two or more answers to the same question. The author juxtaposes the discussions of the Mishnah and the Baraita against Hisdadukh's relationships with her two husbands. These Halakhic discussions in the Bavli are the primary domain at that time of male intellectual prowess. Yet, Anton appropriates such intellectual meditation into the minds of the women who complemented their husbands. Drawing from the Bible, Mishnah, and Talmud, Anton makes often obtuse, obscure, and technically-challenging aspects of Talmudic law more accessible to her readers. These glimpses of Talmudic life and thought seemingly create in the reader a desire to tackle traditional Jewish learning and further discover the original sources for themselves.

Anton also adds secular historical context to the narrative by providing a timeline, representing the recurring military struggles between Rome and Persia that affected her main character and

her family personally. Hisdadkh and Rav are caught up in court intrigue at a time of great political-social change.

These global political events however are masterfully woven alongside the inner life of the women who grapple with fantastic tales of demons, the evil eye from which most die according to Bava Metziah 107b, magical incantations, and the powerful allure and attraction of engaging in sorcery (kishuf). Hisdadukh's husband, the great sage Rava, is a redactor of the Babylonian Talmud whose knowledge of secrets of torah according to Aggadah, enables him to look at sinners and reduce them to a "bag of bones," create a golem out of earth, and resurrect another rabbi from the dead. Together they are imagined by Anton to defeat the evil sorceress Ashmedai and even the angel of death. Anton imagines how Rava and Hisdadukh act beyond the letter of the law by putting themselves at risk and jeopardy on behalf of the needs of the Jewish people while wrestling with intellectual, spiritual, and actual demons. Despite her wisdom and lineage, Hisdadukh is still constrained by her gender, and fights this socially-imposed limitations by entering into the field of sorcery.

When Hisdadukh uncovers that her own mother was a "chief sorcerer," she is motivated even more to defeat an evil rival. Her power is demonstrated by being able to glean information from animals and signs of nature, summon Ashmedai, converse with Samael, avert sandstorms, and create illusory fire.

Hisdadukh is educated and knowledgeable. The *Rav Hisda's Daughter* novel ends with her upcoming marriage to Rava the second suitor. Book Two titled, *Enchantress* depicts Hisdadukh as finally marrying Rava and starting a family.

Anton's tales of sorcery and conjuring are based in the superstitious world of the Rabbis of the Babylonian Talmud during the 3rd to 6th centuries CE. Numerous Talmudic passages deal with witchcraft: JT Hagigah 2:2 (77d)ⁱⁱ; Mishnah Abot 2:7ⁱⁱⁱ; Berakhot 53a^{iv}; Erubin 64b^v; JT Abodah Zarah 1:9 (40a); JT Kiddushin 4 (66c)^{vi}; Sanhedrin 67a^{vii}; Sifre on Deut. 11:25 sect. 26^{viii}; Rosh

Hashanah 2:8; Sanhedrin 100b^{ix}; Sanhedrin chapter 7; halakhah 13^x; BT Sanhedrin 67a^{xi}; BT Shabbat 75a^{xii}; Pesahim 110a^{xiii}; Yoma 83b^{xiv}; BT Hullin 105b^{xv}; Sotah 22a^{xvi}; and Gittin 45a.^{xvii}

If one defines magic as the powers to influence the course of events by using supernatural forces or agencies, then the Rabbinic world of the Babylonian Talmud supports the efficacy of such praxis. A tractate such as Nedarim reveals the Talmudic belief in the power of the word to influence and cause events, without acting in the public realm. The Talmudic sages lived in a world where highly educated people accepted that disease and injuries were caused by demons and the evil eye and magic worked to avert these threats. A female sorcerer trained in magic techniques could gain respect from the male rabbinic hierarchy if she did not work against that hierarchy. The rabbis identified these powers often as stemming from “binding” the demonic^{xviii} or drawing on the powers of impurity.^{xix} (b. Sanhedrin 67b notes that sorcery “serves to draw on the powers of divine agencies.”)

The Bavli documents many cases of sorcery that jive with Anton’s representation of Rav Hisda’s daughter’s use of sorcery. Anton lets us better understand the role of women in the rabbinic patriarchal structure in part because it is not maliciously marginalized women, especially in the area of public ritual. Judith Wegner (in *Chattel or Person*) makes it clear that women were often categorized in the same classification as children, slaves, and the handicapped. In addition, women engaged in sorcery were especially vulnerable to charges of being subversive, and threatening.

Male sorcerers known as wizards were considered less of a threat than female sorcerers. If a man practiced sorcery, he has transgressed rational law, but if a woman practices sorcery she challenges the social order.

It should be noted that the Babylonian Talmud notes a difference between women who are “involved in sorcery” and women who are sorceresses.” The later category is not within the Jewish social fold of the Rabbinic Halakhic system. The former are merely subversive perhaps as in “pious and rebellious” (see Grossman, Avraham, Brandeis Univ. Press, 2004) while the later

present a threat to patriarchal society and often suffered from misogynistic persecution destined to be executed either by hanging or burnt at the stake. The focus of Anton's representation of Rav Hisda's daughter is a woman within the Rabbinic framework who engages in sorcery as a tolerated sub-category of this culture.

Anton provides a most engaging, riveting, and enjoyable exploration of the re-imagined social context of women in the 4th to 6th centuries of the common era when the Babylonian Rabbinic leadership was at its peak, while re-constructing the social world of Rav Hisda's daughter.

Anton draws on archeological excavation of clay magic bowls, which served as a form of amulets for people seeking to counter harmful spirits, cast spells and/or curse one's enemies. In the 19th century, Sir Austen Henry Layard's *Discoveries among the Ruins of Ninevah and Babylon* was a 1853 best seller. While most scholarly attention was initially placed on the excavated palace of Sennacherib and cuneiform library of Ashurbanipal, Layard sent to the British Museum curious bowls that served as incantation bowls from the time of the Babylonian Talmud's formation. These incantation bowls were largely considered archeological flotsam of lesser importance than the artifacts substantiating Biblical history. However, scholars such as James Nathan Ford, Dane Levene, Mathew Morgenstern, Christa Mueller-Kessler, and Shaul Shaked (see *Aramaic Bowl Spells: Jewish Babylonian Aramaic Bowls*, Brill, 396) and others have deciphered etchings of demons on the artifacts. The incantations and spells that Anton deploys in her novel are real examples from Jewish, Christian, and pagan incantation bowls, amulets, and magical instruction manuals that archeologists besides Layard dug up in Iraq, Egypt, and Greece. Anton is not the only author to recognize the importance of the incantation bowls for creative art. In 2013, Israeli author Dorit Kedar published *Komish Bat Mahlafta: A False Biography of a Real Woman*, which is a novel inspired by the magic bowls. Jewlia Eisenberg also drew inspiration from the bowls in her "bowls project," a dome shaped art installation in San Francisco. All three artists, Kedar, Anton, and Eisenberg, imagine how women via engaging in sorcery re-create female fellowship. With Hisdadukh's fellow sorcerers, such as Rahel, Kimchit, and Em, Anton forges a social bonding. All three artists therefore create

a feminist discourse that brings women from the margins to center stage. Anton has her main character Rav Hisda's daughter who takes up an apprenticeship in magic bowl production and pursues a "career" as a sorcerer within the rabbinic social order. By imagining the female relatives of great Talmudic sages engaged in a Cottage industry of making incantation magic bowls and engaging in other sorceries, Anton recuperates the magical arts at the very center of Rabbinic life. Anton also gives voice to the many women of rabbinic culture at its high point in 3rd-4th century Babylonia where magic was real and tangibly felt. Anton reveals how these women who were excluded from the public domain of prayer were able to funnel their desire for religious participation by practicing magic.

Anton's book is supplemented with maps, a glossary, and list of characters to help readers who may be unfamiliar with the subject matter. This novel should be added to synagogue libraries and university collections. The novel will also be of interest to feminist scholars with regards to the role of women in the 3rd-4th century Jewish Babylonia and women in religious life and folklore in general.

Notes

ⁱ Rav Hisda (230-310 CE) was from the town of Kafri and his principle teachers were Rav and Avimi of Sura. After Rav's passing he moved to Sura to study under Rav Huna, and became head of the Sura academy after Rav Huna's passing (Sanh 17b). Rav Hisda's colleagues were Rav Nachman and Rav Sheshet, the latter of whom used to tremble at Rav Hisda's exemplary reasoning capability. His students included Rabbah bar Huna, Abaye, Rami bar Chama, Abba bar Joseph, Hamnuna, and several of his own sons- Nachman, Pinchas, Mari, and Hanan. Despite coming from a priestly family [he received priestly portions of meat] Rav Hisda spent many years in poverty when he ate vegetables (Shabbat 140a) although he eventually became very wealthy [Pesachim 113a] as a date beer brewer. At 16 [Kiddushin 29b] he married the daughter of Rav Hanan, the son-in-law of Rav. He had seven sons and at least 2 daughters. The latter married two brothers, Rami bar Chama and Ukva bar Chama but his greatest son in law was Rava (Abba bar Joseph) whom his widowed daughter married after Rami bar Chama passed on. In Moed Katan 28a it is noted that in Rav Hisda's house they celebrated 60 weddings... He and Rav Huna could pray for rain during a drought and bring on the rains. Rav Hisda asserts that rain is withheld due to neglect of tithes and *terumah* (Taanit 7b). Taanit 12b gives rules for fasting when rain has not come by a certain date. Rav Hisda instituted (berachot 29b) the traveler's prayer and transmitted the prayer the Kohanim (Sota 39a). Rav Hisda was so involved in Torah studies that the angel of death was powerless over him until one time a tree branch cracked and distracted

Rav Hisda long enough that his soul was taken. Shabbat 62b is the basis of Hisda's washing with full handfuls. Shabbat 81b entails Rav Hisda in a boat with a witch, while in Hullin105b Rav Hisda and a sorcerer cast spells on the boat. Shabbat 81b notes that Rav Hisda says *kavod habriot* supersedes a Torah prohibition. Shabbat 140b notes that Rav Hisda taught his daughters proper behavior with their husbands. Rav Hisda was big on *derekh eretz* and says that those who employ obscenity for them *Gehenna* is made deeper. In Bava Batra 141a Rav Hisda is said to prefer daughters over sons. Shabbat 31b provides the reason according to Rav Hisda and Rava that women die in childbirth. In Berachot 51a, we learn that Rav and Rav Hisda hold that God loves Torah study more than synagogue attendance. And in Kiddushin 40b, Torah study is more important than doing *mitzvot*.

ⁱⁱ R. Simeon ben Shetah hanged eighty witches in Ashkelon, these being women who had lived in a single cave and had 'harmed the world'.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hillel said, "the more possessions the more worry, the more wives the more witchcraft, the more female slaves the more promiscuity."

^{iv} The sages learned, "If a person was walking outside a town and smelled a good smell; if the majority of heathens, he does not recite a blessing on the good aroma. If the majority are Jews, he does recite the blessing. R. Yose says, "Even if the majority are Jews he still does not recite the blessing, because Jewish women offer incense of witchcraft." The editors of the Talmud continue to deliberate: "Do all of them [the daughters of Israel] use incense (only) for sorcery?- The fact is a small part [of the incense] is used for sorcery and a small part for scenting garments...."

^v R. Yochanan said in the name of R. Simeon bar Yohai, "that only applied in early generations (if see bread on road), where the Jewish daughters were not flagrantly involved in witchcraft, but in later generations, where the Jewish daughters are flagrantly involved in witchcraft, one does pass the food by."

^{vi} R. Simeon bar Yohai learned, "the best of heathens- kill him, the best of snakes, smash its skull; the best of women- is filled with witchcraft; praised be he who fulfills the will of the Place."

^{vii} On the verse "you shall not suffer a witch to live our sages learned, "witch" refers to both males and females. Why then does it state "witch"(sorceress) rather than male sorcerer? It is because most women are involved in witchcraft." BT Sanh. 67a continues: "Jannai came to an inn. He said to them, Give me a drink of water," and they offered him *shattha* (liquid made from unripe barley mixed with water). Seeing the lips of the woman who brought this to him moving, he covertly spilled a little thereof; which turned to snakes. Then he said "I have drunk of yours now you come and drink of mine." So, he gave her to drink, and she turned into an ass. He then rode upon her into the market. But her friend came and broke the magic charm. She changed back into a human being, and so he was seen riding upon a woman in public." ... The Talmud continues, "There is one beside Him (Deut. 11:35). R. Hanina said, "Even by sorcery a woman once attempted to take earth from under Rabbi Hanina's feet (to perform sorcery against him). He said to her, "If you succeed in your attempts, go and practice it (sorcery). It is written however there is none else beside Him." But that is not so, for did not R. Johanan say, "Why are they called witches? Because they lessen the power of divine agencies. R. Hanina was in a different category owing to his abundant merit.

^{viii} This is analogous to a King who issued a decree saying, 'whoever eats unripe figs of the sabbatical year will be thrown into prison. A certain woman of a respectable family went and ate unripe figs of the sabbatical year and was

sentenced to imprisonment. She said to the king, "I beg of you my lord the King! Inform everyone of my crime, that the people of the country should not say, 'it appears that she was guilty of adultery or of witchcraft.'"

^{ix} "When is she a child- lest she be seduced; when she is a young woman- lest she be guilty of sexual immorality; when she has grown up-lest she not marry; once she is married- lest she will not have children; when she is old- lest she will be involved in witchcraft."

^x "With regards to you shall not tolerate a sorceress to live..." "That verse: a sorceress should not live... the Torah teaches accepted normative behavior (*derekh eretz*) since the majority of women are sorceresses.

^{xi} Our rabbis taught, "You shall not suffer a female sorceress to live? Does this apply to both men and women? IF so why is the female sorcerer stated? Because mostly women are found to be engaged in sorcery.

^{xii} "He who pulls the thread of a seam on the Sabbath is liable to a sin offering; and he who learns a single thing from a magician is worthy of death. As to magicians, Rav and Samuel differ thereon; one maintains that it is sorcery the other blasphemy "

^{xiii} "If two women sit at a crossroads, one on this side and the other on the other side, and they face one another- they are certainly engaged in witchcraft." ... Amemar said 'the chief of the women who practice sorcery told me: He who meets a female who practices sorcery should say thus: Hot dung in perforated baskets for your mouths, O ye females who practice witchcraft! May your heads become bald! The wind carry off your crumbs, your spices be scattered, the wind carry off the new saffron which ye are holding, ye sorceresses as long as He showed grace to me and to you, I had not come among you; now that I have come among you, your grace and my grace are cooled.

^{xiv} Our rabbis taught: five things were mentioned regarding a mad dog. Where does it (the madness of the dog) come from? Rav said: Females who perform sorcery are having fun with it bewitchedly.

^{xv} "Abaye also said, "at first I thought the reason why one should not eat vegetables from a bunch which was tied up by the gardener was because it had the appearance of gluttony but now my master has told me, "it is I because one lays oneself open thereby to the dangers of witchcraft. R. Hisda and Rabbah b. R. Huna once were traveling on a ship. A certain woman said to them, take me with you. But they would not. She then pronounced a spell and the ship was held fast. They in return pronounced a spell and it was freed. She said "what power have I over you? Seeing you do not clean yourself with a potsherd, neither do you crush louse on your clothes, nor do you eat vegetables from a bunch tied up by the gardener and subject to witchcraft.

^{xvi} She was a gadabout woman who was considered by people to be a good person. But she was a witch who invoked witchcraft upon every pregnant woman in order to prevent her from giving birth. Then when the woman's labor pains were great this widow would come and say, 'I will pray for you to give birth immediately.' She would then go to her home and take away the witchcraft and the woman would give birth immediately. Thus people thought she was righteous and pious, and the pregnant woman would go to her before they were due date to give birth and entreated her to pray for them. One day though she left her home and left behind a young lad to guard the home. He heard a sound of movement in the house, and saw nothing but merely heard a sound. He then went and searched and found a barrel, which was covered. He uncovered it, and found witchcraft within the barrel, and her wickedness and

disgusting behavior were exposed and the witchcraft was annulled. From that day on, the women no longer needed her and the people of the city banished her from their midst.”

^{xvii} “The daughters of R. Nahman stirred a boiling pot with their bare hands. This was witchcraft. They stirred the pot with witchcraft.”

^{xviii} An opinion linking the female with Satan can be found in Gen. Rabbah 17:6, which states, “And he closed up flesh about it” - R. Hanina son of R. Ada said: ‘From the beginning of the volume of Genesis until this point the letter *samekh* (first letter of Satan) does not appear, because when Chava was created, Satan was created along with her. And if someone says to you (that the letter *samekh* appears earlier in 2:11) ‘it is surrounded’ – tell him that that refers to rivers.”

^{xix} Commentary also indicates that the magicians of Pharaoh’s court and Balaam at the request of the king of Moab also drew on the *koach tumah* to do witchcraft. Thus, the word “*hamor*” for donkey on which Balaam rides and is said to talk is a pun on Homer, meaning material *gashmiut* i.e. in Greek *Hupikamenon*.