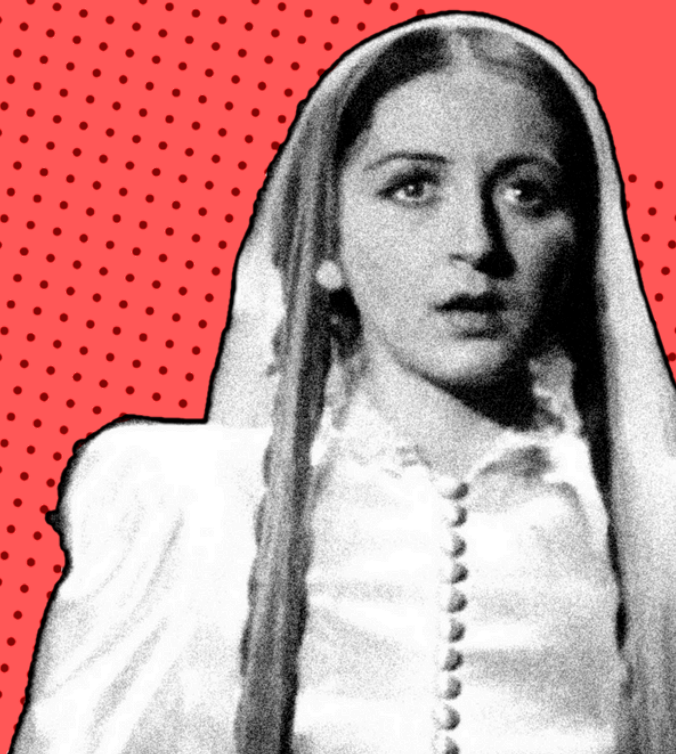


introduction to
JEWISH HORROR

a zine by Ilaria Briata, PhD





I am flesh and blood; ashes, blood, and bile; shame, filth, and worms; a heap of dirt; a vessel full of excrement; a receptacle full of shame and infamy; an impure body, full of rabble, short of days, sated of quiver. A breath of wind can make me fall, a shadow of fear and terror can make me die. My essence is dirt, my end is vermin, my way is to tribulation, my path is to sins, until I die, coming back to nothing, as if I never existed.



H.P. Lovecraft, Supernatural Horror in Literature, 1927

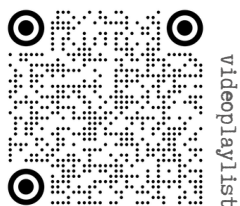
A very flourishing, though till recently quite hidden, branch of weird literature is that of the Jews, kept alive and nourished in obscurity by the sombre heritage of early Eastern magic, apocalyptic literature, and cabbalism. ...

Cabbalism itself, so prominent during the Middle Ages, is a system of philosophy explaining the universe as emanations of the Deity, and involving the existence of strange spiritual realms and beings apart from the visible world of which dark glimpses may be obtained through certain secret incantations. ...

Jewish folklore has preserved much of the terror and mystery of the past, and when more thoroughly studied is likely to exert considerable influence on weird fiction.



Almost a century after Lovecraft's Supernatural Horror in Literature, and eighty years after the historical horrors of WWII, fictional horror based on Jewish folklore is making a comeback. In the third millennium, mystical exotic figures such as golems and dybbuks are materializing once again on the screen and on page thanks to widely distributed products by Jewish creators, mostly based in Israel and the US.



artificial humans
animated from clay
through magic

spirits of the
dead possessing
the living

In today's globalized culture, with the post-colonial tools of the infosphere, we can take curiosity for the culturally extravagant even further and look for the roots of Jewish horror before the advent of horror as a commercial genre.



Rabbi Elijah of Chełm created a man. There is a story about him, recounting that the creature could not talk but was serving like a slave. When the rabbi saw that what he created with his own hands had started to grow stronger and bigger by means of the name written on a piece of paper attached to his forehead at the point that Rabbi Elijah, master-of-the-name, himself feared that he would cause harm and damage, he immediately overpowered him and snatched the piece of paper on his forehead upon which the name was written. It collapsed in a heap of dirt, which he was, but he hurt his master, as he scratched his face while he was grabbing the writing and detaching the name from it.

Megillat Sefer 4



With the power of our intellects, it is difficult to understand how it is possible that the spirit of one who died can act in another living body ... I myself experienced this phenomenon in 1575, while I was in Ferrara. I went to visit a young woman 25 years of age, a young wife, in the company of many distinguished people. I found her stretched out on her bed, lying on her back, like a body without a soul. Her eyes were closed, her mouth was open, and her tongue was very thick ... We saw the throat of the woman swell greatly. The woman felt great pain in all of her limbs and shook and quaked with difficulty and wondrous strangeness, prompting great compassion among all observers. When the spirit entered his place, the girl's entire body, and that side in particular, would shake and quake continuously, like the consumption before the fever.

Shalshelet ha-Qabbalah 86b-87a





From the Bible to the wake of Enlightenment, creatures and entities defying natural predictability and the senses, preterhuman or less-than-divine, have populated the Jewish cosmos.

I looked and lo, a stormy wind came sweeping out of the north—a huge cloud and flashing fire, surrounded by a radiance; and in the center of it, in the center of the fire, a gleam as of amber. In the center of it were also the figures of four creatures ...

That was the appearance of the semblance of the Presence of God. I saw it and I flung myself down on my face.

Ezekiel 1:4-9.28

Alphabet of Ben Sira 7

After that the Holy One, blessed-be, created the world, he created the first man. When he realized that he was alone, he created a woman from earth of his likeness, whose name was Lilith, and brought her to Adam. Immediately, the couple started to quarrel. Adam was saying: 'You lie below!' and Lilith was replying: 'You lie below, because we are equal: we are both made of earth!' – and they were not listening to each other. When Lilith saw the impasse, she called God's name out loud, took off into the air and fled away.

Yet, horror permeates the most concrete and fleshy fibers of human experience as a narrative sublimation of everlooming threat of violence, and as memento mori, i.e., the reminder that the inescapable fate of every life is death.



The Levite seized his concubine and pushed her out to the man at the door. They raped her and abused her all night long until morning, and they let her go when dawn broke. Toward morning the woman came back; and as it was growing light, she collapsed at the entrance of the house where her husband was. When her husband arose in the morning, he opened the doors of the house and went out to continue his journey; and there was the woman, his concubine, lying at the entrance of the house, with her hands on the threshold. "Get up," he said to her, "let us go." But there was no reply.

When a sick person is about to die, the Angel of Death stands above his head, brandishing a sword, dripping a drop of poison. As soon as the sick person sees him, he starts quivering and opens his mouth. When the poison drips into his mouth, the first drop makes him die, the second one causes him to putrefy, the last one turns his face green.

TB 'Avodah Zarah zob

Everyone lies alone [in the grave]. One cannot turn around, nor smell himself rot with his nose; eyes cannot see his face mutate, ears are deaf - better for them not to hear the murmur of the maggots inside him, crawling up and down, drinking his blood, feeding on his fat, tearing his skin, invading his throat, penetrating one orifice, emerging from another. All of him is vanishing, while decay advances, as if turned to stone, completely unaware. Such is the lot fated to men born of women, the affliction of humanity, primeval, unchangeable.

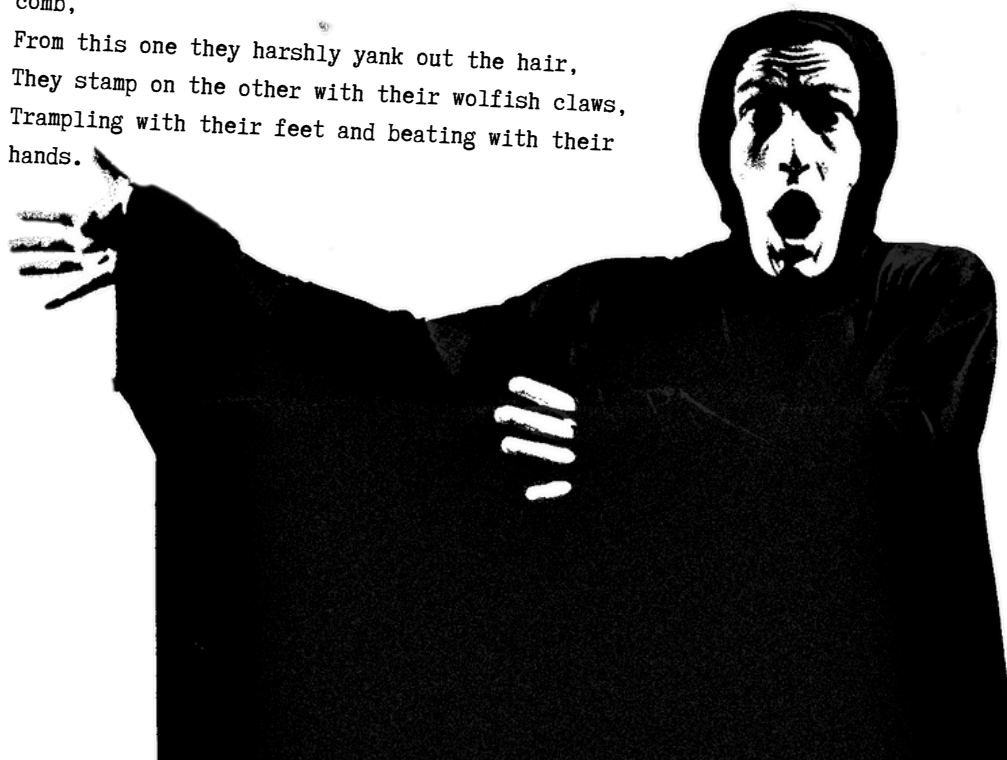
Sefer Be'er Mayyim Hayyim 1a



The tragedy of existence rejoins the imaginative realm of anticipation when brooding over the afterlife, a time-and-space obscured by the thick dust of the grave, whose supposed peace is likely discontinued by worms pullulating from rotting tissue or by cruel angels dragging those remains into hell.

Tofteh 'Arukh 186-210

At this sight my heart and my eyes
Are filled with wonder, marvel, and amazement:
A roaring crowd screams and wails,
Oppressed and furiously vexed, they're being cast
From cold to heat and from heat to cold. ...
This one they maul with fangs as sharp as flint,
In the flesh of the other, they make gashes with a
comb,
From this one they harshly yank out the hair,
They stamp on the other with their wolfish claws,
Trampling with their feet and beating with their
hands.



In this hazy phantasmagoria of infected corpses and intruding ghosts, empowered monsters, and overpowering felons, Jewish horror is made of both Jewishness and horribleness. On the one hand, what makes such horrors 'Jewish' is their creation as cultural products that can be defined 'Jewish' – because of their content informed by Judaism or because of the specifically Jewish public they address. On the other hand, what makes these Jewish creations 'horror' is their power to inspire the feeling of horror, together with its cognate emotions – fear, disgust, anxiety, awe.

From the perspective of Jewish studies, researching Jewish horror means to look for the manifestations of the emotion of fear in the history of Jewish culture.



If a person conjures to mind multiple horrors, he will start shaking and feeling as though there were cuts in his flesh, and his heart will die in his chest, until all corporal drives vanish. Instead, he finds himself yearning for the light of life, reaching for the Holy One, blessed be, and His Torah, longing for a place of glory in paradise.

Thanks to the emotional bond with its user, horror allows us to test our moral comfort and challenge our knowledge of the world, of humanity, of self by simulating the experience of the unknown and the undesirable. We tend to presume that, before modernity, horror only served as a pedagogical tool in the hands of religious guides, including the rabbis, while today horror is a mere source of recreation. However, what if horror succeeded in transmitting lore and morals exactly because, psychically, fear brings together pain and pleasure?

Georges Bataille, *The Cruel Practice of Art*, 1949

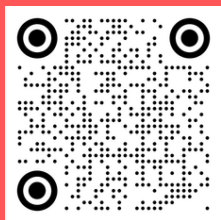
When horror is subject to the transfiguration of an authentic art, it becomes a pleasure, an intense pleasure, but a pleasure all the same. ... It is with a sort of mute, inevitable, inexplicable determination, like that in dreams, that the fascinating specters of misery and pain have always lurked among the background figures in this carnival of a world.



What morbidly fascinates you about cultural otherness and spiritual mysteries?

[illegible]

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website

