

ABSTRACT

REFLECTIONS ON MAGICAL TEXTS ON JEWELRY AND AMULETS
OF JEWISH WOMEN AND CHILDREN FROM YEMEN AND HABBAN

Carmella Abdar

The starting point of this essay is a small unique corpus of Yemenite Jewish women's jewelry, found in both private and public collections, containing magical inscriptions engraved on silver plaques. The presence of visible engraved magical texts is unusual in Yemenite jewelry. The common practice was to conceal and encase magical texts written on parchment or paper and rolled in cylindrical containers, which formed part of the jewelry. The appearance of visible engraved magical inscriptions on customary types of jewelry, as is the case in this corpus, is non-traditional and raises numerous questions. The first relates to the spatio-temporal contextualization of this corpus. Are we dealing with an uncommon traditional feature or a new one introduced into the traditional Yemenite jewelry in Yemen or with the product of intercultural encounters in Israel? Other queries regard relationships between body and text and particularly sacred magical texts, magic, gender, and more.

This article employs an integrative contextual approach and comparative methodologies to explain the appearance of the engraved magical texts on jewelry. It combines the study of formal and technical material aspects of jewelry and the art of silversmithing, the study of the dressed body, and the textual study of Jewish magic, seeing them as a complex whole whose various aspects illuminate one another. The research is based on a detailed and meticulous analysis of the material, technical, figurative, functional, and iconographic aspects of the jewelry, as well as on palaeographic decoding and analysis of the contextual interpretations of the texts engraved on it. The research also compared the magical texts engraved on amulets for protection of children and women, those written on paper and placed in amulet cases, and spells found in Yemenite Jewish books of magical instructions, known as "Sifrei Hefetz".

The article examines the subject from new perspectives based on an interdisciplinary approach, combining different fields of research. It points out links and associations between formulaic magical texts from well-known amulet books such as the Razi'el, which reached Yemen and appear on the jewelry pieces, and between the magical motifs found on the jewelry. Together, these constitute a unique magical cosmology intended to be displayed on women's bodies.

Since studies combining textual, visual and material aspects of Yemenite cosmology and magical practices and beliefs are relatively new, many questions await further inter-disciplinary research.