

ABSTRACT

WHEN LILITH DISRUPTS THE CHESS GAME WITH ASHMEDAI:
THE DEMONIC IN YAAKOV SHABTAI'S 'MA'ASE YERUSHALMI'

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On his deathbed a rich merchant made his son swear to him that he would not sail the seas. The son defies his father's last will, and his journey ends when he encounters a big storm, which sends him to the land of the demons. There he marries the daughter of Ashmedai. She ends up killing him after he breaks his oath to her. In 1969 Yaakov Shabtai started working on a stage adaptation of this medieval tale, giving his play the name of the Hebrew story it was derived from: 'Ma'ase Yerushalmi' (A Jerusalem Story). This article examines Shabtai's adaptation strategy and what drew him to this specific story, permeated by Jewish demonology. The article begins by decoding the replacement of Ashmedai's daughter by Lilith as Shabtai's way of giving presence to the concealed passion in the medieval story and to confront instincts with norms. The article continues by showing how Shabtai restrains Lilith's destructive power (illustrated by her disruption of the chess game in the play) as he does to other nihilistic characteristics that he embeds in the play, which he found in Gershom Scholem's studies of radical Sabbateanism and the biblical text. This is part of the general orientation of the play, which creates complex and elaborate structures of order and disorder, blurring the separation between the demonic and human worlds. Additionally, this article argues that in using 'Ma'ase Yerushalmi' Shabtai found an echo of the problematic experience of his generation. This play is closely tied to his prose and addresses the society's loss of direction and inspiring ideals.