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# The Anger of a Poet: Judah Ibn Shabbetai and the Depiction of Evil in *Words of Curse and Excommunication*

## 1 Introduction: An Invective in Rhymed Prose and Poetry

The name of Judah Ibn Shabbetai, a Jewish author who was born in Christian Spain around 1168 and who died around 1225, is largely associated in the history of medieval literature with the work *Minḥat Yehuda śone' ha-nashim* (*The Offering of Judah the Misogynist*).[1] This text, which was quite widespread and appreciated throughout the medieval period, recounts the adventures of Zeraḥ, a young man who swore to his father that he would renounce marriage. This attitude brings him face-to-face with the anger of the women, led by the elderly Kozbi, who defeats him in the end. Ibn Shabbetai also wrote *Milḥemet ha-ḥokhma ve-ha-ʿosher* (*The Battle between Wisdom and Wealth*),[2] extant in numerous manuscripts, which tells the story of a man and his two twin sons, one rich and the other wise. A debate over the two qualities is articulated around these two sons, a very popular technique of the time.[3] Less well known and considered a minor work is Ibn Shabbetai's *Diḇre ha-'ala ve-ha-nidduy* (*Words of Curse and*

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**1** This text was edited by Matti Huss, *Critical Editions of Minḥat Yehuda, Ezrat ha-nashim and En mishpaṭ with Prefaces, Variants, Sources and Annotations*, 2 vols. (Ph.D. diss. Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1991).

**2** Edition and study in Aurora Salvatierra Ossorio, "*Milḥemet ha-ḥokmah we-ha-ošer* de Yehudah ibn Šabbetay: Propuesta de lectura, edición y traducción," *MEAH*, Hebrew section 63 (2014): 1–41.

**3** For example, the numerous debates between the soul and the body or the pen and the sword written in many different languages throughout the Middle Ages. See Elena González-Blanco García, "La disputa del alma y el cuerpo: múltiples versiones de un tema panrománico y unidad cultural en el Medievo," in *Estudios sobre la Edad Media, el Renacimiento y la temprana modernidad,* eds. Francisco Bautista Pérez and Jimena Gamba Corradine (San Millán de la Cogolla: Instituto Biblioteca Hispánica, 2010), 227–37; Amparo Alba, "Espada vs. Cálamo: debates hispánicos medievales," *Thélème. Revista Complutense de Estudios Franceses* 11 (1997): 47–55. See also Haviva Ishay's contribution in the present volume.

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*Excommunication*). In this case, only two copies are extant, one in the Bodleian Library at Oxford, Ms. Can. Or 29, published by Israel Davidson in 1909,[4] and one in New York at the Jewish Theological Seminary, Ms. 5522, unpublished to date.[5]

Despite the limited attention it has received,[6] this is a unique work because of its contents and the literary form in which they are expressed. As the title indicates, the text includes, *grosso modo*, a collection of accusations and curses aimed at five figures who have attacked the first person narrator of the work.[7] This central section is preceded by a fragment listing the causes for the anger and followed by an array of curses that include a sentence of excommunication and a violent parody of the prayer for the dead. Its style follows that of the Arabic *maqāma:* rhymed prose and poetry that alternate at different points in the text. Jewish authors had only been using this literary model for a short period of time to write fiction in Hebrew,[8] creating narratives that employed different structures and arguments in their desire to both entertain and instruct. The works were first addressed to patrons and courtiers who they sought to honor in one way or another.

In the case of *Words of Curse and Excommunication*, however, the function was quite different. Here, rhymed prose and poems are no longer at the service of delighting or teaching (or both), but form a harsh attack aimed at publically discrediting five members of the Jewish community of Zaragoza. Moreover, the result is an innovative change that entails a modification of the traditional system of expressing criticism and censuring in Hebrew letters.

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**4** Israel Davidson, "*Diḇre ha-ʾala ve-ha-nidduy*," *Ha-Eshkol* 6 (1909): 165–75. Unless otherwise indicated, the references to *Diḇre ha-ʾala ve-ha-nidduy* come from this version.

**5** I am currently preparing a new edition of this text that takes both manuscripts into consideration.

**6** See, for example, Judith Dishon, "A Critical Study of the Writ of Excommunication by Judah Ibn Shabbetai" [Hebrew], *Criticism and Interpretation. Journal for Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Culture* 4–5 (1974): 48–53; *eadem*, "The Lost Historical Work of Jehudah Ibn Shabbetai" [Hebrew], *Zion* 36 (1977): 191–99; *eadem*, "New Light on Judah Ibn Shabbetai as a Historian" [Hebrew], *Bitzaron* 63 (1971): 56–65.

**7** Without going into the different hypotheses about what an author is or is not or their degree of autonomy with respect to the text, in this study, I use the term "author" to refer to the empirical author/real author, i.e. the physical and extratextual person, in this case Ibn Shabbetai. I use the expression "first person narrator" to refer to the autodiegetic narrator who tells the story and is a central character in it. See Gérad Genette, *Figure III* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1972) and *Noveau discourse du récit* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1983).

**8** In fact, Solomon Ibn Sahl and Joseph ben Meir Ibn Zabara wrote the first Hebrew compositions in rhymed prose with interspersed poems in the twelfth century. A few years later, Ibn Shabbetai himself used this model in the two works mentioned earlier: *Minḥat Yehuda śoneʾ ha-nashim* and *Milḥemet ha-ḥokhma ve-ha-ʿosher.*

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Until the appearance of this text, the preferred place to express emotions of anger and rejection in medieval Hebrew literature was the genre of satirical poetry, with a tone that ranged from mockery to angry invective. Such, for instance, was the case with the great poets of the Golden Age. Samuel ha-Nagid (993–1056), Solomon Ibn Gabirol (ca. 1020–ca. 1057) and Moses Ibn Ezra (ca. 1055–1138) all used this form to criticize specific individuals, social groups like physicians or the elderly, and behavior like impiety and ignorance. Some of the best-known examples include the poems written by Ibn Gabirol after he had to leave Zaragoza that criticize its inhabitants for ignorance and evil,[9] and those by Moses Ibn Ezra bemoaning bad poets and the lack of education of the Jews in Christian lands.[10] There is a sharpness in these works by the Andalusian authors compatible with the literary taste of their time, which avoided, for example, allusions to sexual practices or physical defects and did not include the names that would make it possible to identify their adversaries.[11]

Arabic satire also found a special mode of expression in poetry dating back to pre-Islamic times, a tradition that lived on in the works of Arabic-speaking Andalusian authors.[12] The same can be said for the Romance satire of the twelfth-thirteenth centuries. At that time, poets from Catalonia and Aragon who represented the voice of an elite upper class wrote in verse about rivalries, enmity, and the vices of the powerful. Iconic examples include Guillem de Bergadán (1138–ca. 1196) and Guillem de Cervera (1259–1285) and their attacks on the evils of the era and on specific individuals.[13]

Poetry and satire, then, were closely linked in medieval literature on the Iberian Peninsula. From this perspective, the discursive model of rhymed prose and poetry chosen by Ibn Shabbetai to manifest his anger is striking in its departure from the conventions of his time. It is true that in the late twelfth century, parody and satire began to appear in Hebrew fictional compositions written in rhymed prose with interspersed poems. One such case is *Sefer ha-*

**9** Ḥayyim Schirmann, *Hebrew Poetry in Spain and the Provence* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute; Tel-Aviv: Dvir, 1960), 2:207–10.

**10** See, for example, Schirmann, *Hebrew Poetry in Spain and the Provence*, 1:379

**11** On the tradition of satire in Andalusian Hebrew poetry, see Arturo Prats Oliván, "La sátira y la invectiva en el *diwan* de R. Šelomoh bar Reuben Bonafed," *Sefarad* 66/1 (2006): 69–88, esp. pp. 71–81.

**12** Among them, Ibn al-Rūmī, Abū Tammām or al-Mutanabbī wrote virulent epigrams, see Geert Jan Van Gelder, *The Bad and the Ugly: Attitudes towards Invective Poetry (Hijā') in Classical Arabic Literature* (Leiden-New York-Copenhagen-Köln: Brill, 1988), 90–94.

**13** See Kenneth R. Scholberg, *Sátira e invectiva en la España Medieval* (Madrid: Gredos, 1971), 22–46.

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*shaʿashuʿim* (*Book of Delights*)[14] by Joseph Ibn Zabara (ca. 1140–ca. 1200),which includes, among others, a satirical description of the land of Natash, a hidden demon who accompanies the protagonist, Joseph, on his journey.[15]

In Judah al-Ḥarīzī's (1166?–1225) *Taḥkemoni*[16], the defining model of the classical Hebrew *maqāma*, satire—particularly of social types[17]—is a key element in several of the tales, including the *maqāma* about the synagogue cantor (gate 24), the physician (gate 30), and the merchant (gate 34). Even Ibn Shabbetai himself uses this model in various passages in *Minḥat Yehuda*, like the text about the *ketubba* (marriage contract) and the description of Rizpah, the bride "black as a crow."[18] In all these cases, however, parody and satire remained within the limits of stories that formed part of court amusement and sought, above all, to entertain and/or teach. That is what was expected of these narratives.

By contrast, when Ibn Shabbetai chose this textual method for *Diḇre ha-ʾala ve-ha-nidduy*, his intention was clear: to express anger and enmity, and to attack vicious characters. These invectives against specific individuals found a suitable framework in rhymed prose and poetry with which to take revenge, defend the first person narrator, and bring the public over to his cause. As never before seen in Hebrew *belles-lettres*, the author describes particular acts of evil and feelings of hatred in the style of the *maqāma*, a literary structure that gives him room to develop the plot and facilitates its dissemination.

The core of *Words of Curse and Excommunication* is made up of the first person narrator's accusations and curses against various members of the Zaragoza community. His voice censures their conduct (hypocrisy, bribery, calumny, and the like) and threatens them with horrible punishments (destruction, the fury

**14** See Israel Davidson, *Sepher Shaashuim. A Book of Mediaeval Lore by Joseph ben Meir ibn Zabarra* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1914; reprint Berlin: Eshkol, 1925). A new edition has recently been published by Judith Dishon, *Ha-rofeʾ ve-ha-shad. Mahadura madaʿit shel Sefer ha-shaʿashuʿim le-Yosef ben Meʾir ibn Zabara* (Lod: Mekhon Haberman, 2018)

**15** "They arise early and watch late to set up posts wherein to make contention and strife to glow. Their speech is falsehood and they are masters of deceitfulness; their faces glow ruddy, but they are slack in the work of the Lord. Among them are sufferers of gonorrhea and leprosy, and epilepsy". Translated by Moses Hadas, *The Book of Delight by Joseph ben Meir Zabarra* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932; 1960[2]): 163.

**16** See Judah al-Ḥarīzī, *Taḥkemoni or The Tales of Heman the Ezraḥite* [Hebrew], ed. Joseph Yahalom and Naoya Katsumata (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 2010).

**17** See Ayelet Oettinger, "Criticism of the States in Judah al-Ḥarīzī's Book of Taḥkemoni and in European-Christian Literature of the Thirteenth Century: Affinity and Distinction," in *Studies in Medieval Jewish Poetry: A Message upon the Garden*, ed. Alessandro Guetta and Masha Itzhaki (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2009): 85–96.

**18** Hebrew text in Huss, *Critical Editions of Minḥat Yehuda*, 580, 605.

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of God, hell) in response to the attack that he has been subject to. The text does not list the reason for his opponents' anger towards the narrator, but does reveal the weapons used to harm him: they burned a book he wrote and excommunicated him. Because of the nature of the work and the lack of any outside evidence, it is not possible to confirm the extratextual truth of this story with solid arguments. It is not known with absolute certainty if the things happened as they appear in the text (was the author excommunicated? Was the cause a book of history?[19] Did he ask for others to be excommunicated?). At this time, it has not been possible to corroborate these events with documents. However, regardless of their "historical veracity," the recourses used to discredit the adversaries have social meaning and codify the values of the time.[20] The way in which a rival is excluded from his own group reveals an exercise of power and control that places him outside the circle shared by the emotional and textual community where this piece may have been written.

## 2 Book-burning: Trying to "Erase" an Adversary

Like its form of expression, *Diḇre ha-ʾala ve-ha-nidduy* is also unique because of the reasons behind its composition. In it, Ibn Shabbetai rebukes and curses his enemies using a first person narrator, providing names and some details to help his readers recognize them: Abraham ben Samuel Lobel, the *aljama*[21] secretary; Abraham ben Solomon Lobel, the synagogue prayer reader; Joseph Benvenist,

**19** In *Minḥat Qenaʾot* by Jonah Ibn Bahlul (Guadalajara, 13th century), Wieder identifies the only known mention of this book and its burning; Dishon argues that long fragments of this work exist in *Milḥemet ha-ḥokhma ve-ha-ʿosher*, a conclusion rejected by Huss. See Naftali Wieder, "The Burned Book of Judah Ibn Shabbetai" [Hebrew], *Meṣuda* 2 (1943): 121–22; Judith Dishon, "The Lost Historical Work of Jehudah Ibn Shabbetai" [Hebrew], *Zion* 36 (1971): 191–99; Huss, *Critical Editions of Minḥat Yehuda:* 189–90.

**20** Therefore, I focus on the text's socio-cultural background. Rather than making speculations about the extratextual biographical author's circumstances, I concentrate on the social practices that the work represents as an expression of cultural codes and as a product of the context in which the text was created, in line with the principles of New Historicism, see Erll Astrid, "Cultural Studies Approaches to Narrative," in *The Routledge Encyclopaedia of Narrative Theory*, eds. David Herman, Manfred Jahn and Marie Laure Ryan (London: Routledge, 2005), 88–93.

**21** "*Aljama*" was the term used by the non-Jewish authority to officially designate self-governing Jewish communities. A specific number of members was required for Jewish life to operate normally.

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Solomon גורגולוט (?), in charge of taxes, and Meir אלגרנגושי (?).[22] These figures are described as evil, foolish slanderers in a discourse riddled with biblical citations reminiscent of a prophetic oracle. Explicitly, the narrator accuses them of having expelled him unjustly from the community ("Here are these foolish men who have excommunicated this man, versed in praising with poetry. In response, let them be excommunicated"[23]) and of having burned his book for no reason: "These are the men who devise iniquity (Ezek 11:2). They are joined by all the evil and perverse men, those who give foolish counsel (Isa 19:11). They sanctified a solemn assembly (2 Kgs 10:20) in the sanctuary and the atrium and burned the book that was law and testimony (Isa 8:20)."[24]

As noted, there is no reliable information about this book from other sources except the mention by Jonah Ibn Bahlul (early thirteenth century) in *Minḥat Qenaʾot* (*Offering of Jealousy*), a book in praise of Maimonides's *Mishneh Torah*. The available facts, therefore, come from *Diḇre ha-ʾala ve-ha-nidduy* and leave many unanswered questions. Among these, Ibn Shabbetai conceals the reasons why the book was condemned to the fire. According to the data presented in the work, the contents of the "burnt book" were not particularly different from those found in other medieval Hebrew books that also contain praise of illustrious Jews and Christians:[25] "And I recorded the virtue of the pious, the scholars who do good, poets, princes and nobles, those who offer assistance in times of misfortune, the guardians of the Law (Jer 2:8), famous men and princes, councilors and kings and the feats of the five kings of Sefarad."[26] However, *Diḇre ha-ʾala ve-ha-nidduy* does not make it possible to determine which Jewish figures were praised, and the identification of the Christian monarchs can only be hypothetical.[27] All these figures are presented as victims—like the first person narrator

**22** Of this group, only Abraham ben Samuel Lobel, who signed some documents in Judeo-Arabic dated 1217 and 1223, has been identified with certainty, see Yitzhaq Baer, *A History of the Jews in Christian Spain*, vol. I (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1961), 398. The documents were published by Jose María Millás Vallicrosa, "Documentos hebraicos del archivo del Pilar de Zaragoza," *Boletín de la Real Academia de Historia* 96 (1930): 669–84.

**23** See Davidson, "*Diḇre ha-ʾala ve-ha-nidduy*," 167. Cf. Babylonian Talmud Ar 22a. Part of this fragment is written in Aramaic, something which is repeated at other points in the work.

**24** See Davidson, "*Diḇre ha-ʾala ve-ha-nidduy*," 167.

**25** In the last case, examples include the poems of Todros Abulafia (13th century) dedicated to King Alfonso the Wise. See Schirmann, *Hebrew Poetry in Spain and the Provence*, 2:441–42.

**26** See Davidson, "*Diḇre ha-ʾala ve-ha-nidduy*," 167–68.

**27** Accepting that this expression refers to the "five Kingdoms," it can be assumed that the recipients of his praise were Sancho the Strong (Kingdom of Navarre), Jaime I (Kingdom of Aragon), Alfonso VIII (Kingdom of Castile), Alfonso IX (Kingdom of Leon) and Alfonso II (Kingdom

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—of the disappearance of the book that held their memory, but all remain anonymous.[28] Moreover, unlike the other two works by Ibn Shabbetai, *Words of Curse and Excommunication* is not dated by means of the manuscripts or dedicated to a patron,[29] which makes it more difficult to precisely delimit the time and spatial framework.

It is not, however, the intention of this study to discuss the extratextual historical details of this work or affirm or disprove the veracity of the data about the author's life contained in it. Beyond these questions, it is the very act described that is striking: the burning of a book (written in Hebrew) by some members of the Jewish community itself. The context in which this occurred and the social meaning of this action help explain its effectiveness as an instrument to express anger and disdain, on the part of both the first person narrator and his adversaries. The destruction of books formed part of a shared landscape in medieval Europe. This efficient means of power and authority materialized in the condemnation to the fire of texts from other communities that were seen to express alien beliefs and ideas. For example, several works by Maimonides were burned in Montpellier in 1232 by the Dominicans, and numerous copies of the Talmud, along with many other Hebrew manuscripts, went up in flames in 1242 in Paris on the orders of Pope Gregory IX. This action was repeated with particular virulence throughout the thirteenth century.[30]

However, even within a single group sharing a religious and cultural identity, the destruction of texts was a weapon of censure and intimidation. In Andalusia there are several accounts of the Muslim authorities decreeing this punishment; at least six Arabic works were publically burned between the mid-tenth and late-twelfth centuries, including the case of Ibn Abī ʿĀmir al-Manṣūr (ca. 939–1002), the chief minister and virtual ruler of the Umayyad caliphate, who burned the books from the library of the caliph al-Ḥakam II (961–976), and al-Muʿtaḍid's (1042–1061) condemnation of the verses of Ibn Ḥazm (994–

of Portugal). All reigned during a period between around 1208 (the date of the first writing of *Minḥat Yehuda*) to at least 1225 (the date of the last revision of *Minḥat Yehuda*).

**28** This is not an unusual circumstance: books that were burned are often described in very general terms, see Janina M. Safran, "The Politics of Book Burning in al-Andalus," *Journal of Medieval Iberian Studies* 6/2 (2014): 8.

**29** *Minhat Yehuda* was dedicated to Abraham Ibn Alfakar of Toledo, possibly in 1208, and *Milḥemet ha-ḥokhma ve-ha-ʿosher* to Todros (ben Joseph) ha-Levi (Abulafia) of Burgos in 1214.

**30** Although the destruction of hundreds of copies in 1242 left a notable gap in the memory of the Jewish community, this punishment was repeated in later years (1247, 1270, 1290, etc.). An interesting study of the burning of the Talmud and its literary conceptualization can be found in Susan Einbinder, *Beautiful Death: Jewish Poetry and Martyrdom in Medieval France* (Princeton-Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002), 70–90.

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1064), litterateur, historian, jurist, and theologian, to the bonfire.[31] Christian Europe also engaged in this type of process under the impulse of the ecclesiastic courts. For instance, the French scholastic philosopher Peter Abelard (1079–1142), was forced to burn his *Introductio ad Theologiam* himself and Pope Innocent III ordered his works burned in 1140, while the *Physion* of Almaric, or Amaury of Chartres (d. ca. 1206), was destroyed in Paris in 1209, the same year that David of Dinant's *De Metaphysica* was burned.[32]

In Jewish circles, as far as is known, these actions were less common. However, some isolated references to Hebrew books being burned by coreligionists exist. For instance, in the early thirteenth century, an unknown rabbi named Abba Shalom reported that he had burned a text he found offensive and heretical because of its defense of anthropomorphism,[33] and around the same time *Sefer Ḥasidim* (*The Book of the Pious*, twelfth-thirteenth century, Germany) states that "impure" Jewish books are to be eliminated in a fire.[34] The destruction of books, then, was not a practice unknown to thirteenth-century societies, forming part of a shared context. In *Words of Curse and Excommunication*, the burning of a book written by the first person narrator is a key motif as an expression of a highly symbolically loaded public penance ordered by his adversaries.[35] The narrative voice in the text is not interested in describing the contents of his book or in exploring the possible reasons for its fate. There is no defense against very common accusations of the time, such as the fact that it contained what the authorities considered religious "mistakes" or included specific subjects (logic, mathematics, astrology) often related to the prohibition of studying philosophy. The book does not, therefore, make it easier to identify the "perverse men" who caused its disappearance with a specific ideological or religious model.

The author's efforts are focused on exonerating the book from all blame and proclaiming its many virtues:

**31** See Janina M. Safran, "The Politics of Book Burning in al-Andalus."

**32** A list of books censored (and often burned) by Christian authorities can be found in Jonathan Green and Nicholas J. Karolides, *Encyclopedia of Censorship* (New Edition) (New York: Facts on File Library of World History, 2005): 109–10.

**33** See Einbinder, *Beautiful Death*, 88.

**34** Ivan G. Marcus, *Piety and Society: The Jewish Pietists of Medieval Germany* (Leiden: Brill, 1981), 62. See also *Sefer Ḥasidim* edited by Judah Wistinetzki with an introduction by Jacob Freimann (Frankfurt am Main: Wahrmann: 1924), §§ 1350–1351.

**35** See Alexander Murray, "On Book Burning in Medieval Europe," in *Heresy and the Making of European Culture: Medieval and Modern Perspectives*, eds. Andrew P. Roach and James R. Simpson (London-New York: Routledge, 2016), 77–88.

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May those who burnt the book be excommunicated.
It gathers together your pearls with an idea,
makes necklaces of gold with them
and encircles them around your necks.
If there is a bell on the hem of the robe,
Its beautiful praises[36] will be your bells.[37]

By describing the book's many qualities, he underscores the limitless evil of those who destroyed it for no reason. To that end, Ibn Shabbetai takes full advantage of the social significance and strong symbolic content of book-burning in the Middle Ages, a powerful spectacle loaded with meaning.

This ceremony was designed to have a strong public impact. In fact, demonstrating that a book had been burned was as or even more important than making it disappear (indeed, in the Christian world, one copy of the condemned text was usually preserved by the religious authorities).[38] As with other public punishments, this ritual was a powerful transmitter of messages: it terrified, concretized what the work deserved, purified the community, restored order by eliminating the threat, etc. Often, this condemnation gave form to a political act of ideological legitimation. It was an exercise of power whose meaning could have a higher value than the burning of the work itself.

The medium used for the destruction—fire—is also extremely symbolically loaded. Although not the simplest procedure, it was the preferred method for eliminating texts. On rare occasions, books were buried or torn up and, when this occurred, the penalty was considered reduced. Flames are a terrible force of nature, and in the medieval period, a sort of magical-religious character and power of purification were attributed to them,[39] as evidenced by the ordeal by fire, where the element proved the innocence or guilt of the accused. The symbolism of fire in its most extreme form is reflected in the judicial process that ended with the condemned being brought to the bonfire; even the bones and bodies of the accused who had already died were publically burned.

Moreover, in the Jewish world, the gravity of burning a book was intensified by the fact that texts containing the name of God could not be burned (except when they were idolatrous). This rule, which derives from Deut 12:3, even prohibits the erasure of a single letter of the divine name.[40] The first person narrator

**36** The praises contained in the book.
**37** See Davidson, "*Diḫre ha-ʾala ve-ha-nidduy*," 169.
**38** See Murray, "On Book Burning in Medieval Europe," 80–82.
**39** Ibid., 83–84.
**40** See, among many others, Babylonian Talmud *Sheḫuʿot* 35b and *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhot yesode ha-Torah* 6:4.

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mentions this prohibition in his depiction of the extreme impiety of his enemies; his work contained the name of God and burning it is a transgression that must be severely punished: "They have no fear of this glorious and awesome Name, whose wonders I included in the book."[41] "take revenge, God, and excommunicate these evil men, who burned your glorious Name (Neh 9:5)."[42]

Equally important in this act—with performative elements—is the site where it takes place. As stated in *Diḫre ha-ʾala ve-ha-nidduy*, the decision to burn the book was made in the synagogue and the burning appears to have been located in that setting as well ("They sanctified a solemn assembly in the sanctuary and the atrium and burned the book that was law and testimony"[43]). This space parallels the mosque in the Muslim world, the church in the Christian context, or places near these buildings. All of the locations that play a prominent role in the book-burning ceremony have a special meaning for the community.[44] In this case, the place for meeting, study, and prayer, the heart of the Jewish community, is chosen as the site of punishment and humiliation. The choice, of course, is not innocent.

This staging once again underscores the evil of the adversaries. They have appropriated a weapon that, far from reestablishing order, now punishes an innocent man. The narrator becomes the victim, thus highlighting the negative image of his rivals and the terrible harm they have done to him. To that end, he uses the power, the social impact, and the connotations implicit in book-burning in the Middle Ages to efficiently transmit the degree of injustice of his accusers. The punishment that the narrative voice claims to have suffered expresses not only a radical rejection of his text, but also of the writer. Those whose books are consumed by fire are publically discredited before the witnesses to the ritual. This time, however, he is innocent, a blameless figure attacked by enemies who have committed worse sins.

Their impiety, indeed, goes further. The destruction of the book is not only presented as an attack on its author. The kings of Sefarad and nobles of Israel are also victims since the memory of their deeds has been erased. Even more momentous, though, is the fact that God himself has been offended by these members of the Zaragoza community, who employed such an immensely symbolically

**41** See Davidson, "*Diḫre ha-ʾala ve-ha-nidduy*," 167.

**42** See ibid., 168.

**43** See ibid., 167.

**44** For example, the works of Ibn Masarra were burned in the courtyard of the Great Mosque of Cordoba in 961, and Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed*, according to some scholars, was burned near Notre Dame Cathedral. See Moshe Carmilly-Weinberger, *Censorship and Freedom of Expression in Jewish History* (New York: Sepher Hermon Press, 1977), 36.

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loaded act to denigrate their "enemy." This alone reveals their evil and the unjustness of their actions.

## 3 Excommunication: A Literary Weapon against a Rival

The burning of the book is accompanied by another act that shares this radical expression of rejection and exclusion: excommunication.

> Here are these foolish men who have excommunicated this man[45], versed in praising with poetry. In response, let them be excommunicated. Those who attend this excommunication trial (*din nidduy*) have found fault in me.[46] But, of what am I guilty? They have condemned me severely as if in me they had found a sin written (Jer 17:1). Who will contend with me? Let us stand together. Who is my adversary? Let him come near me.[47]

These "sinners, perverse, damned and seditious men who turn their backs on the Lord" (Zeph 1:6) and "write accusations against a man of Judah"[48] are none other than the five members of the Jewish community of Zaragoza mentioned earlier. They have destroyed a book for no reason and, consequently, have also expelled its author from the community without cause. In the text, this unjust decision can only be explained by the hatred and evil nature of the accusers. In opposition to them is the image of a virtuous man, free from all guilt: the first person narrator.

Again, the terms surrounding this punishment (if it occurred at all) are not known, but it is known that *ḥerem* (excommunication) in its different forms constituted an instrument of discipline and social control in the hands of community leaders during the medieval period. As with book-burning, excommunication formed part of the social reality of the period. A tool of power and coercion, there was no better mechanism to destroy ideas[49] and exclude people.

**45** See Babylonian Talmud Ar 22a.
**46** Cf. Jer 2:5.
**47** See Davidson, "*Diḇre ha-ʾala ve-ha-nidduy*," 167. Part of this fragment is written in Aramaic, something repeated throughout the work.
**48** See ibid., 168.
**49** With this aim, in 1210, 1215, and 1230, excommunication sentences were decreed in Paris for anyone reading or teaching Aristotle's books on natural philosophy, whether in public or private, see Hans Thijssen, *Censure and Heresy at the University of Paris 1200–1400* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988), 40–56. The same procedure was used by Solomon of Montpellier in 1232 when *ḥerem* was pronounced against anyone reading the works of Maimonides.

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In the case of the Church, it was in the twelfth-thirteenth centuries that the rules related to this punishment were systematized, distinguishing between major and minor excommunication.[50] It was also at that time that it regulated the reasons for excommunication, who could apply them, and the results: it was forbidden to speak, eat, or drink with an excommunicated person under threat of fine; they could not receive the sacraments, have a Church burial, or serve as religious minister.[51] These people, then, were deprived of their spiritual community and exiled from the group.[52]

At the same time, Jewish communities in Medieval Europe witnessed an increase in *ḥerem* as a punishment. It has been suggested that the dominant role played by excommunication in the Catholic Church may have been a contributing factor. In fact, some of the penalties applied to excommunicated Jews were probably taken from medieval Christian practices.[53] Moreover, the punitive and coercive function became more clearly established: its deterrent power with regard to crimes or misconduct increased and the consequences were intensified.[54] An excommunicated person would be treated as a non-Jew and was forbidden from using any distinctive marks (the *mezuza* was taken down from the door; *ṣiṣit* strings were cut). In practice, excommunication meant the "civil death" of the condemned person.

This instrument, then, was used to establish and reinforce codes of behavior and to separate the person from the community and limit (or impede) relationships with its members. Excommunication in its different forms (*nidduy* and *ḥerem*[55]) meant ostracism. Furthermore, various sources show that this tool

**50** The former, "major," separates one from the Church and is linked to anathema (solemn curse); the person cannot enter churches, receive sacraments or have relations with other Christians, etc. The "minor" separates the person from the Eucharist and other sacraments. See Elisabeth Vodola, *Excommunication in the Middle Ages (*Berkeley-Los Angeles-London: University of California Press, 1986), 35 – 38.

**51** See *Partida* I, *Título* 9 from *Las Siete Partidas del Rey D. Alfonso X el Sabio*. Edition by the Real Academia de Historia (Madrid: Imprenta Real, 1807).

**52** Emilio Mitre Fernández, "Integrar y excluir: comunión y excomunión en el Medioevo," *Hispania Sacra* 65 (2013): 519 – 42.

**53** Israel Abrahams, *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages* (London: The Macmillan Company, 1919), 53.

**54** For instance, they could not study or teach, do business with others, circumcise their sons, their wives were expelled from the synagogue, etc. See Babylonian Talmud Ber 19a. Maimonides describes the consequences of excommunication during the medieval period in *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhot Talmud Torah* 7:4 – 7. For the Jewish community of Aragon, see Yom Tov Assis, *The Golden Age of Aragonese Jewry. Community and Society in the Crown of Aragon*, 1213 – 1327 (London-Portland, Or.: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1997), 156 – 58.

**55** The *nidduy* was imposed for 30 days and when the accused repented of his conduct, the punishment ceased. During the time of *nidduy*, he could only socialize with his children and

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was often used arbitrarily as a means of control. While rabbinic sources viewed the measure as a way to purify behavior, maintain harmony between community members, and protect them from offenders, in the Middle Ages it was also an effective way to handle an adversary. Beyond the religious concept of punishing serious sins, it took on implications of censure for temporary, political aims. In the polarized Jewish society of the early thirteenth century, the leading elite used excommunication in its various degrees not only to guarantee compliance with the rules of the *aljama*, but also to reinforce its authority and power. In principle, this required the agreement of the assembly, but this decision was often made in secret and with total impunity, with the elite aware that its power was almost absolute.[56] The situation is similar to what occurred in the Christian world where, beginning in the mid-eleventh century, popes increasingly used excommunication as a way of showing their power and settling political questions.[57]

In the late twelfth to early thirteenth centuries, when *Words of Curse and Excommunication* must have been written, anathema (*ḥerem* in the text) was a successful tool for social exclusion and a weapon in the hands of the powerful. In the case of Ibn Shabbetai, it is not possible to know exactly who had this power in the Zaragoza community.[58] Neither are there any extra-literary documents that confirm what Ibn Shabbetai says about the first person narrator's excommunication or provide specific details to explain the punishment. Again, however, the point of this paper is not to discuss the value of the text as a historical source to establish the author's biography, but rather its validity as a literary motif to express anger and censure towards rivals.

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wife, nobody could eat with him and he did not count for the *minyan*. The more rigorous expression of excommunication is *ḥerem*. This entailed expulsion from the *aljama* and the impossibility of being buried in a Jewish cemetery. See Haim Hermann Cohn, "Ḥerem," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Second Edition, eds. Fred Skolnik and Michael Berenbaum (Detroit: Macmillan Reference, 2007), 15–16. Both punishments appear in *Words of Curse and Excommunication*.

**56** On the tensions between the power of the leaders and the community when imposing *ḥerem*, see Naʿam Zohar, "'You Must be Wholehearted' versus Fear of the Authorities and the *Ḥerem*; A Study in Naḥmanides's Political Philosophy" [Hebrew], *Daat: A Journal of Jewish Philosophy and Kabbalah*, 52/2 (2003): 143–51.

**57** For example, the excommunication of King Alfonso IX of Leon in 1196, of Pedro III of Aragon in 1282, and the excommunication decreed by Gregory IX against Emperor Federico II in 1229.

**58** These may have been the "*grandes* of the *aljama*," who could use excommunication to reinforce their authority and ensure compliance with community norms. See Asunción Blasco Martínez, "Jaime I y los judíos de Aragón," in *La sociedad en Aragón y Cataluña en el Reinado de Jaime I (1213–1276)*, ed. Esteban Sarasa (Zaragoza: Institución Fernando el Católico, 2009), 97–134.

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The construction of the story and the characterization of its protagonists are, to a large part, determined by the use of anathema. Ibn Shabbetai takes advantage of the social significance of a punishment whose real and metaphorical meaning and value as a public event were increasing. Its presence polarizes the image of the figures in the story and provokes a reaction of acceptance or rejection among readers. When the first person narrator presents himself as the victim of an unjust excommunication, he is positioning his attackers in a space of extreme evil. The dramatic consequences of this act serve to enhance the figure of the innocent man and severely vilify his accusers.

In the medieval imaginary, the impact of this punishment is difficult to match. Indeed, the author appropriates this procedure of exclusion and its effectiveness as a mechanism for collective delegitimization. The narrator responds to the excommunication decree that he has received by proclaiming a *ḥerem* himself whose consequences highlight the impact of the punishment on the social order. In our text, the excommunicated are not only expelled from the community of the living, but even excluded from the community of the dead:

> I shall set my face against them for harm[59] and I shall curse them in the name of God; I shall excommunicate them, I shall consecrate their names to anathema (...). Moses commanded us a law, an inheritance (Deut 33:4): they do not count among the three and, according to the words of the law, they do not pray together with the ten. Moses decreed from Sinai that they shall not enter into thy congregation (Lam 1:10). Neither shall they remember it; neither shall they visit them (Jer 3:16), they shall not be lamented; neither shall they be buried (Jer 16:4).[60] Those who die in the city shall be eaten by dogs (1 Kgs 21:24)! And those who die in the fields, let them be eaten by reptiles and wolves![61] Since all are the seed of evil, the people against whom the Lord hath indignation forever (Mal 1:4).[62]

The first person narrator reveals in *Words of Curse and Excommunication* the reason for this punishment—the burning of his book and his excommunication—and both things are explained by the depravity of his enemies. Sins, vice, and all types of reprehensible behavior characterize the five members of the community whom he accuses. His depiction of them assembles a catalogue of reprehensible acts that cover the entire network of relationships, social, economic, religious, and ethical. His accusations draw a general picture of the meaning of

**59** Cf. Jer 44:11.

**60** These consequences of excommunication (prohibition from forming part of the *minyan*, counting among the three people needed for prayers after meals, burial) are included in Maimonides's *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhot Talmud Torah* 7:4.

**61** Cf. 1 Kgs 21:24.

**62** See Davidson, "*Diḇre ha-ʾala ve-ha-nidduy*," 168.

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evil and sin when the line separating them from the crime was blurring. As a whole, they are all impure ("they are sullied and will sully you"), and as individuals, guilty of the worst behavior. Hypocrisy, bribery, corruption, theft, calumny, adultery, impiety, and so forth are all words he relates to these people as he curses them.[63] Their terrible power to cause harm knows no limits. In fact, to protect themselves, he asks the inhabitants of Zaragoza to leave the city until his accusers die ("leave Zaragoza, its inhabitants"[64]). This time, then, the spaces are reversed; those who are excommunicated remain, while it is the community that must distance itself from the threat they represent.

These accusations use violent language to describe each of the five men. Their defects and most severe faults are unveiled, justifying the sentence pronounced upon them, which God himself executes. The harshness of their punishment is equated to the most terrible biblical punishments: the flood, the serpent, Sodom and Gomorra, Pharaoh and the figure of Koraḥ. Now God "cast upon them the fierceness of his anger (Ps 78:49), making his fury and his anger against these five evil damned men burn."[65]

Ibn Shabbetai includes in his text elements that formed part of the excommunication process in the Middle Ages, making it easy for his readers to identify his discourse with this type of trial. He provides anathema formulas, but reformulates them and uses them to reinforce his expression of anger. This is the case with the central motif of the excommunication ritual: curses directed at the anathematized person in the ceremony that constitutes this act. In *Words of Curse and Excommunication*, the curses hurled at his enemies expand, developing the sentences of the rabbinic authorities, which are much more concise and limited.[66] Terms derived from the ארר and קלל roots are scattered throughout the text, constantly reminding the reader of the "damned" condition of the accused. The Torah, in turn, provides abundant material to wish them all sorts of woes, while also adding solemnity and force to his imprecations:

> He terrifies them in his wrath (Ps 2:5); let their table become a snare before them (Ps 69:23), let not the sin of his mother be blotted out (Ps 109:14), their root shall be as rottenness, and their blossom shall go up as dust (Isa 5:24), in all evil in the midst of the congregation and assembly (Prov 5:14), let there be no lack of flow of blood nor leprosy, nor misery nor dis-

**63** Their evil reaches such an extreme that, as in the case of Abraham ben Lobel, they subvert everything until the world is converted into chaos; if they pray for an ill man, he dies; if they bless the bride and groom, joy becomes sorrow, and if they ask for rain during a drought, the sky closes up. See ibid., 169–70.

**64** See ibid., 170.

**65** See ibid., 173.

**66** Some of these formulas can be found in *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhot Talmud Torah* 7:2.

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> grace in their houses, nor who walks with a cane, nor who dies by the sword, nor who lacks bread,[67] let them have neither witness nor defender, nor anyone to pity them; break the teeth in their mouths, O God (Ps 58:7).[68]

These curses culminate in an excommunication formula reminiscent of those found in several medieval sources such as, for example, in *Orḥot ḥayyim* (*Paths of Life*) by Aaron of Lunel, a rabbi in thirteenth-fourteenth century Provence.[69] Ibn Shabbetai once again takes advantage of the elements that form part of the excommunication document, making them more severe to inflict greater harm upon his targets and add more strength and power to his words:[70]

> This is the dictated sentence, the order decided by the saints:[71] may they be beaten by evil spirits,[72] with the anathema and excommunication with which God cursed the serpent, with all the excommunications and anathema with which the prophet cursed, with the anathema that Joshua decreed against Jericho,[73] with the curse of Elisha against those who importuned him[74] and with the curse against the servant who disobeyed his word,[75] with the curse of the son of Gideon against the nobles of Shekhem who worked wickedly,[76] and with the anathema of the dog pronounced by a rabbi,[77] and with all the excommunications and anathema proclaimed by the ancients, the Sanhedrin, the priests, the scholars of the Talmud, and the courts from the days of Moses to Rab Ashi, and with every evil decree written by the twenty-four, and also with all the anger, curses, and disgrace that are not written in the book of the Torah.[78]

The condemnation pronounced here (and additional curses directed at the skies, the spheres, and the angels) is made even more dramatic. To this earthly excommunication, Ibn Shabbetai adds another site of exclusion in the afterlife. It is, as it were, a posthumous excommunication expressed through a parody of the Jewish prayer for the dead. This time, instead of wishing them the protection of God

**67** Cf. 2 Sam 3:29.
**68** For this fragment, I am following the New York-Jewish Theological Seminary Ms. 5522f. 34a for a clearer reading.
**69** See Moses Schlesinger, ed., *Orchot Chajim von R. Aharon Hakohen aus Lunel*, Part 2 (Berlin, 1902), 502–503 and ff.
**70** In this respect, it is interesting that some of the lines from this *ḥerem* appear to be erased and scratched off in Oxford-Bodleian Library Ms. Can. Or 29.
**71** Cf. Dan 4:14.
**72** See Targum Onkelos to Deut 32:24.
**73** Cf. Josh 6:7, ff.
**74** Cf. 2 Kgs 2:24.
**75** Cf. 2 Kgs 5:27.
**76** Cf. Judg 9:57.
**77** Cf. MQ 17a.
**78** See Davidson, "*Diḇre ha-ʾala ve-ha-nidduy*," 174.

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in the holy heights where sins are unknown and souls rest, hell is their abode and demons await the condemned.

> Hell (*gehenna*) is open. Wailing, lamentation, and ceaseless fatigue (...); proximity to sin, distance from salvation, terrors and torments, dark and slippery (Ps 35:6), rising wrath (Ps 78:21), anger that never ends, trepidation that never tires, rage without tranquility, a deep pit, panic and pitfall (Lam 3:47), burning fire, (...) and a malign wind spins, Satan causes confusion, it is Asmodeus who receives; sin, furor and endless agony, roaring of field beasts, Valley of Siddim (Gen 14:3), snares and nets (Qoh 7:26) (...), satyrs shall dance there (Isa 13:21), irrevocable trouble and rebuke (2 Kgs 19:3), smoking firepot with blazing torch,[79] black like the soot of a cauldron, may the soul of the evil ones be punished![80]

This scene of torture and condemnation is an essential part of the medieval imaginary. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, specifically, interest grew in establishing a more precise idea of what happened in the afterlife. Hell as a place of eternal condemnation and torment was reinforced in the Christian mentality of the era, with Satan himself acquiring an important role he had not had before. Ibn Shabbetai seems to take advantage of this collective fear of hell and devils to depict this space of condemnation and radical exclusion for those "who do not count among the sons of Israel."[81]

The violence of the language and literary images in *Words of Curse and Excommunication* are put at the service of the expression of anger and revenge. In this text, however, the author explores other resources to denigrate adversaries. The very act of exclusion (*nidduy* and *ḥerem*) that is the focus of the book and its social significance transmit emotions of enmity with extreme efficiency. Judah Ibn Shabbetai converts this intra-community ritual into a literary recourse to describe the ferocity of the attack and his response in rhymed prose and poems.

## 4 The Expression of Anger: Exclusion from the Community

In medieval literature, different ways existed to narrate anger, an emotion related to the way in which people think about themselves, their society, and their

**79** Cf. Gen 15:17.
**80** See Davidson, "*Diḇre ha-ʾala ve-ha-nidduy*," 175.
**81** See ibid.

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values.[82] At times in the texts, this emotion is expressed and verbalized, while on other occasions it is represented by furious figures who manifest their rejection physically with gestures or actions. In Ibn Shabbetai's work, anger is expressed with words, but its intensity particularly materializes in his appeal to two public ceremonies: book-burning and excommunication. Whether *Words of Curse and Excommunication* is read as a real past event or as fiction, the negative emotions that these rituals project in relation to the structures and values of the time are undeniable.

The world in *Diḇre ha-ʾala ve-ha-nidduy* is configured around two groups: the evil (fools, sinners, infidels) and the noblemen ("the sons of Israel"). This work shows what characterized these "evil ones" for the first person narrator and why. It also provides information about the weapons that his enemies used to attack him and his own response. These actions, the destruction of a book and expulsion from the community, are social (and political and ideological) uses that are connected to community punishment and rejection, and both are ambivalent tools. On the one hand, they make it possible to maintain the order, values, and codes of behavior that configure and identify a group. They thus have a regulating capacity in social relations that normalizes and balances. On the other hand, they are rituals that project animosity and disdain and can be legitimate or not, legal or not, according to the circumstances and contexts in which they are applied. They can be a justified response, but also an illegitimate expression of slander and sin, as also occurs with anger. This is reminiscent, in a Christian context, of the medieval institution of *ira regis* (royal anger),[83] a legally codified institution that also had this dual nature. This was a royal sanction that could be used to punish serious crimes, a just anger that, like excommunication, entailed separation from the group for committing certain acts. However, its reasons were often arbitrary, a pure whim on the part of the monarch, causing it to lose any positive aspects.[84]

**82** On the use of anger, its expression, and functions in the Middle Ages, see Barbara H. Rosenwein, ed., *Anger's Past: The Social Uses of an Emotion in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca-London: Cornell University Press, 1998).

**83** Gerd Althoff, "*Ira regis:* Prolegomena to a History of Royal Anger," in *Anger's Past,* 9–74; Hilda Grassotti, "La ira regia en León y Castilla," *Cuadernos de Historia de España* 41–42 (1965): 5–135.

**84** A very well known case of *ira regis* in medieval literature is found in *Cantar del Mio Cid* 1995. See, among many others, María Eugenia Lacarra, "La representación del rey Alfonso en el *Poema de mio Cid* desde la ira regia hasta el perdón real," in *Studies in Medieval Literature in Honor of Charles F. Fraker,* eds. Mercedes Vaquero and Alan Deyermond (Madison: Hispanic Seminary of Medieval Spanish, 1995), 183–95.

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Judah Ibn Shabbetai uses the two different meanings that can be transmitted with anathema and book-burning: the evil nature of those who use it unjustly and their cruelty and abuse of power, and his innocence under attack and the nobility of his own figure. The first person narrator's rivals are "slanderers," corrupt, sinners, etc., but they are, above all, the men who excommunicated him and destroyed his work for no reason, whose acts excluded him from the community to which he belonged. It is difficult to imagine a greater expression of censure in the Middle Ages. In a society primarily defined by religious belonging, someone expelled from the community was left in a no-man's land. In a context where religious identity offered the natural place for self-definition, nothing was more dramatic than exclusion from the group.

In *Words of Curse and Excommunication*, Ibn Shabbetai uses the rituals that allow for this exclusion to project the intensity of hatred and revenge. In a literary context, he reformulates the implications and connotations that *ḥerem* and fire had for his coreligionists. Legitimate, regulated tools in the community become powerful resources to express anger in two different ways. In this invective, the anger that condemns him coexists with the anger that justifies him; while he is fully legitimated, in the case of his adversaries, it emphasizes their evil nature and guilt. The most serious forms of exclusion (*ḥerem* and *nidduy*) express feelings of hatred, along with the concerns and values of the era in a satire that, in form and content, blazed new trails in the literary art of medieval Hebrew invective.

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