

A LOST JEWISH POET: THE CASE

by David Basch (3.16.12)

To those unacquainted with the evidence, few subjects will appear as unpromising as a Jewish Shakespeare. However, most curiously, the finding of strictly Judaic elements in his plays reveals the Bard's knowledge of *Talmud*, *Midrash*, and *Aggadah* — literatures all but unavailable in the England of his time.

While skeptics may reject the diagnostic worth of even some Judaic elements found in the work of an early modern author who has demonstrated a prodigious knowledge of world literature, its presence, easily confirmed, poses a major challenge to scholarship. Why has this Judaic content been little accounted in earlier study? How did Shakespeare gain access to this literature? Does it appear in patterned ways, revelatory of its author? These are among the questions assayed here.

Exhibit A of the evidence would present a sampling of Shakespeare's use of *Talmudic* materials. Some of this appears in easily identified lines, such as "*What's mine is yours and what is yours is mine,*" and "*Sin will pluck on sin,*" appearing, respectively, in *Measure for Measure* and *Richard III*. While both lines are drawn from the *Talmud's Pirke Avoth*, their simplicity is such to pass them by unnoticed. But, when it is learned that the continuation of the *Talmudic* line that begins, "*Sin plucks on sin,*" which runs to "*sechar mitzvah mitzvah*" ("the reward of doing the *deed* of the commandment is the doing of the *deed* of the commandment") is to be found in *Coriolanus* in praise of Marcius, a man who "*rewards his deeds with doing them,*" it becomes evident that the Bard has more fully rendered this *Talmudic* line. Note here, in this second part we are actually given a "*derash*" (an interpretation) of this part of the line and not merely its translation since one of the meanings of "*the reward of the mitzvah is a mitzvah*" is that *the deed is its own reward*, as his deeds were for Marcius. But these are only two of the many lines of *Pirke Avoth* which Shakespeare can be found to have quoted.

And lest it be surmised that Shakespeare restricted himself to sayings from *Pirke Avoth*, of which there were some earlier Latin translations, we find numerous examples from other portions of the *Talmud* that had not been translated. For example, King Priam in *Troilus and Cressida* presents the *Mishna's* five penalties to be paid by one who injures another. Priam notes

this in telling his sons that the Greeks have offered to strike off these exact *five penalties* were the Trojans to restore the kidnapped Helen. Says Priam, “***Deliver Helen, and all damage else*** — *As honour (transformed from boshes), loss of time (shevet), travail (tzaar), expense (repou’i), Wounds (nezek),... — will be struck off.*”

Even more marvelous are some of Shakespeare's plays that dramatize books of the *Bible* and serve as parables of biblical wisdom. While the *Bible*, of course, was widely read in the England of the poet's time, what is revealing are the allusions in these to parochial Judaic elements and literatures virtually unknown to Gentiles of the period. Thus, *Hamlet*, which is a cautionary tale, is in effect a parable vivifying precepts of the *Book of Ecclesiastes*, and in doing so uses such things as *Talmudic* controversies — *are you allowed to take the word of a heavenly creature to resolve legal issues on earth?* — and *medrashic* themes — *the certainty of facing God’s judgment in the afterlife* — to make its points. Similarly, *King Lear* turns out to be Shakespeare's interpretation and explication of the deeper truths of the suffering of the righteous in the *Book of Job*.

More veiled, but no less a dramatization of a book of the *Bible*, is *The Merchant of Venice*. This play conveys in disguised form the themes of the *Scroll of Esther*, including, surprisingly, its Judaic triumph: both feature a traditional Jew as central; in both, a woman must be won to marriage through a “*lottery*,” etc. While to learn of these aspects and more requires careful attention to details of the play and knowledge of its particularistic Judaic allusions — much too complex a matter to summarize in brief — some signs of this are most explicit.

For example, while Christians consider mercy to be the grand hallmark of their religion — implied by Portia's world famous speech on the transcendent value of mercy, drawn from a line from ben Sirah — when Shylock's enemies have brought him down to utter defeat, they do not show him their vaunted mercy. Shylock is stripped of all his wealth and forced to convert — hardly the practice of the wonderful mercy espoused by his enemies. This is one of many such reversals in this play that stamp it as the poet's version of the type of play, called the *Purimshpiel* — *Purim play*. These were written by Jews of the European Ghettoes in honor of the holiday.

Concerning direct historic evidence, British historian, Peter Levi, in *The Life And Times Of William Shakespeare* (1986), reveals that Shakespeare's father,

John, was left a legacy, recorded in a preserved court document, in which his name is given as "*Johannem Shakere*." The historian seemed not to know that "*Shakere*" has a Hebrew meaning as a form of the Hebrew word, "sheker," "false." The word as "*shakere*" is pronounced exactly in the Ninth Commandment in the phrase, "*false witness*" (*eyde shakere*). This suggests an identity as a crypto-Jew, especially when the word is considered in connection with *Isaiah 63:8* — "*They are my people, children who will not be false*" (*lo ye'shakeroo*). Apparently, at the time of the Shakespeares, not being false was an impossible condition if a Jew wished to live in England where Jews were illegal, having been banished almost 400 years.

Have we here more circumstantial evidence ultimately signifying nothing? Once again, the skeptic will find no sanctuary. For the evidence demonstrates that Shakespeare knew the meaning of this name and its portent since he found ways to interject it into some of his plays in dramatic form. For example, in *Richard III*, we find evil Richard knocked off his horse that had given him power and was now limping toward defeat. In one of drama's most memorable lines, Richard cries, "*A horse! a horse! my kingdom for a horse*" — a most clear sign that Richard thinks a horse will save him. This must recall the words of *Psalms 33:17* that most emphatically answers Richard: "*False is the horse for salvation*" ("**SHEKER** *ha'soos lit'shu'ah*"). Appearing in this biblical line is the poet's Hebrew name, *sheker/shakere*. Shakespeare repeats this dramatic device featuring his name in allusions to biblical verses at least three more times in his plays — an amazing accident of chance if that is what these are.

The poet also represented this name in his 1596 Coat of Arms. The original application for this still exists and includes a tell-tale sketch of his arms and a motto, "*Non Sanz Droicht*" ("*Not Without Right*"). The sketch features a falcon, a species known from falconry in English as a "*saker*" — consult an English dictionary for this word. This is a name that obviously resembles "*shakere*." Note that, when spelled in Hebrew, the letter that begins it, the "*shin*," can be pronounced either as "*s*" or as "*sh*."

Furthermore, when analyzed, the configuration of the coat of arms, which depicts the *saker* standing on one foot and shaking a spear, reveals the poet identifying himself as a son of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. (*See a reproduction of the coat of arms on the last page of this article.*) Illustrative of how these identifications are made, the bird standing on one foot recalls the *Talmudic* account about the sage Hillel, in which a prospective convert to Judaism offers to do so if Hillel teaches him the entire *Torah* while he stands on one foot. Hillel accomplishes this in a teaching that happens also to be embraced by Shakespeare's motto, "*Not without right*."

The poet's motto appears drawn from *Genesis 18:25*, where Abraham pleads for the inhabitants of the city of Sodom, saying that, if God destroys the wicked together with the righteous, "*the judge of all the earth will not do right.*" Translating Abraham's plea into a behest gives the adage, "*Not Without Right*" (*al beli mishpat*), revealing the source of the poet's motto and him as a disciple of the teaching of Abraham. Other allusions similarly link the poet's Coat of Arms to Isaac and Jacob.

Finally, there is the evidence to be found in *Shakespeare's Sonnets*. Its 154 poems can be revealed as patterned on the 150 biblical *Psalms*, many of which sonnets showing up as parallels to correspondingly numbered psalms, including some of their direct addresses to God, *Who turns out to be one of the mysterious friends of the poet*. For example, *Sonnet 30's* couplet of gratitude — "*When I think of thee (dear friend), All losses are restored and sorrows end*" — parallels David's *Psalms 30* which similarly thanks God Who "*has changed my mourning into dancing.*" Concerning mourning, the sonnet mourns for "*precious friends hid in Death's dateless night*" and is actually a "*sheloshim*" — which literally means *thirty* in Hebrew — alluded to in the sonnet's number 30. A "*sheloshim*" is a traditional follow-up public remembrance for a departed person *thirty days* after burial, as the poet seems to well know.

We soon learn that Shakespeare's poems are hardly odes expressing the feelings of a man in thrall to unholy passions, as some have alleged. They are actually dedicated to higher purposes, in which the poet's friends include God, allegorical representations of aspects of man's soul — the good inclination, represented as a handsome young man, and the bad inclination as the "dark lady" — and spiritual mentors and friends of the poet — some of which being historic personalities that are well known to readers. These sonnets testify to the wisdom and love of the Creator in fashioning our human nature, even as they exemplify the highest levels of the poetic art. The poems are beautiful and rich as, with their insights, they plumb the most profound depths of life experiences.

The trail of these Judaic elements in Shakespeare's work, left as clues by the greatest of poetic communicators, await fuller scholarly exploration of a kind that has to this date hardly begun.

The book noted below uncovers many of the poet's hidden codes in the poet's sonnets:

THE SHAKESPEARE CODES: *The Sonnets Deciphered* (2000)

Book jacket statement

by Rabbi Emanuel Rackman

Chancellor, Bar-Ilan University, Israel and New York

Once again I have the pleasure of reading more of David Basch's work concerning Shakespeare's links to the Jewish people. True to the promise of the title of his new book, *THE SHAKESPEARE CODES*, he has indeed been resourceful in finding the Poet's own "codes." As before, Shakespeare is shown to draw on literary devices only accessible through an understanding of their Judaic sources. These are seen to provide unique windows to his inner thoughts on many personal and general topics. Coming from the eminent Poet, what is learned will undoubtedly be an important addition to his legacy to the world. It will surely be of enormous interest to the Jewish community and will inspire many to take a renewed and deepened interest in their traditions and learning that had so moved the Poet.

Rabbi Emanuel Rackman
Ador 1 5760 - February 2000

www.davidbasch.net/; www.davidbasch.net/codes.htm

On the following page is a facsimile of Shakespeare's proposed *Coat of Arms* as presented in his application to British authorities. Readers are invited to find for themselves the allusions to *Patriarchs, Isaac and Jacob* that are contained in the image. Also included in the original application was the poet's motto, *Non Sanz Droicht (Not without right)*.

Non Sanz Droicht ("Not Without Right")

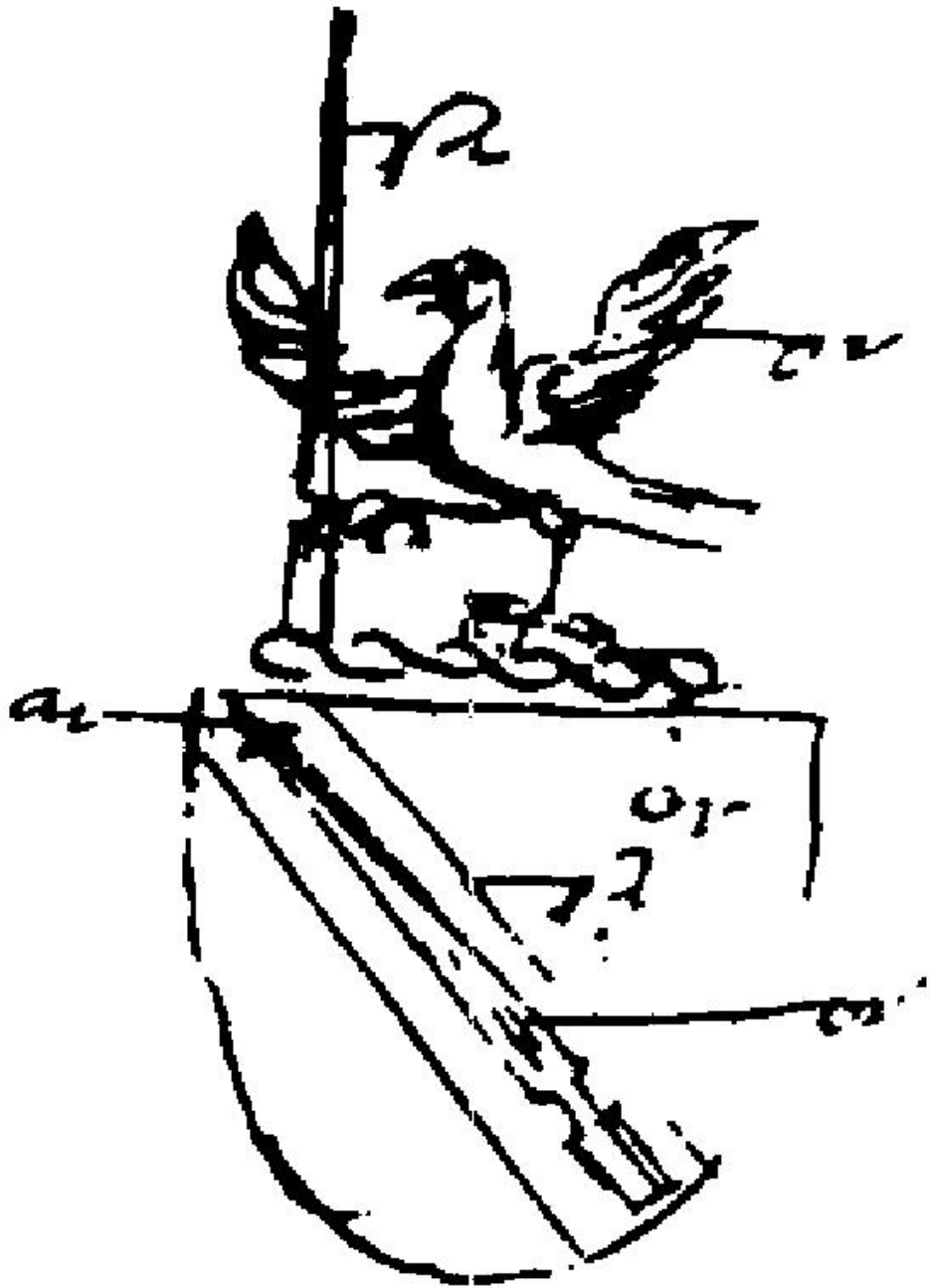


Figure 2-1