



A YEAR OF MAGICAL THINKING
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Towards the end of my year at the Wissenschaftskolleg, I found myself in the sunlit reading room of the Vorderasiatisches Museum, holding an Aramaic incantation bowl that I'd examined for possible inclusion in a Jewish Museum Berlin exhibit, for which I'd been consulting. The magic bowls, as these artifacts are sometimes called, were spirally inscribed regular kitchen bowls in late ancient Mesopotamia, many of them by Babylonian Jews writing in the same Aramaic dialect that we find in the Babylonian Talmud – the center of the classical Jewish canon.

The bowls are talismans, and their aim was to provide protection for the households in which they were buried. As with other ancient Near Eastern writings deposited in building foundations, reading the bowls is fundamentally different from studying other kinds of inscriptions. With the latter, one experiences the dizzying sensation of encountering words written long ago yet read many times since. With the former, you are accessing a text that was never meant to be conventionally read in the first place. Of course, the magic bowls were composed with care, and their language was perceived as powerful and

productive in controlling an “audience” of (mainly demonic) forces. The bowls’ power does not derive from an ability to directly reach human readers. Instead, it operates on another metaphysical plane.

The tradition of submitting a piece of writing for the Wiko Yearbook is something like producing a magic bowl. Of course, the text will be accessible to Fellows and friends of the Kolleg. Perhaps, like I did on some long winter Friday nights, a future reader may flip through a forgotten *Jahrbuch* resting quietly on an abandoned shelf in their Villa Walther flat. But I’m not sure that that imagined reader is the sole or even primary address of the writing. Just as the Aramaic incantation bowls were not written so that a mid-career Talmudist spending a year in Berlin could study them a millennium and a half later, the Wiko *Jahrbuchbericht* is not chiefly produced for an expectant audience of regular readers, eagerly consuming these nostalgic, playful, and performative essays.

This existentialist train of thoughts leads me to another, unsettling observation that our regular academic work is also not unlike the production of Aramaic incantation bowls. Especially for those of us working on hidden corners of the humanities, our journal articles and monographs are read by a vanishing community of specialists. This realization is rendered even more disconcerting by the attention lavished on us over the course of the year by the remarkable Wiko staff. The pampering, the celebrating, and most of all, the care with which our seminars are duly recorded and deposited for posterity is gratifying – and yet, also disconcerting.

Unlike a good number of my colleagues, I did not grow up in a family of professors where academic work was presumed to possess obvious importance. And in the corner of American academia in which I toil, it is teaching and advising undergraduates that is valued supremely, while the relationship between scholar and students (or should I put it in American terms: producer and consumer) is kept proportional. Research is admired but deemed as somewhat peripheral to our main role as teachers in the College.

Spending a year in Berlin reminded me that, in fact, rarified scholarly and cultural work *is* critical. The throngs of people crowding the Berliner Abend and enthusiastically cheering the Rector’s presentation of the Fellows, the presence of scholars and high-cultural icons in German life, the crowded museums, and the packed opera houses all renewed my confidence in the power of art and scholarship, even in our late, mindless age. *Regular* people in this part of the world continue to read, learn, think, and absorb deeply. Our scholarship and other elevated forms of cultural production provide an essential, irreplicable service.

The research project I worked on at Wiko, and which I will continue to work on for some time, examines the processes by which the many texts *included* within the Babylonian Talmud became the gargantuan, crystallized compilation we now know of as the Babylonian Talmud. Much of my research focused on “big” things, such as inventorying all the “digressive” materials that made their way into the Talmud despite having nothing to do with the regular aims of the compilation. Increasingly, I found myself also pondering a smaller-scale question of no less importance for understanding the formation of the Talmud – how did all the Talmud’s numerous traditions – ranging from remedies for skin-boils (“Take ginger, and slag from silver, and sulfur, and wine vinegar, and olive oil, and white naphtha, and spread it with a goose feather”) to information about the ports of Bahrain (“There are three ports. Two are Roman and one is Persian. The Roman one imports coral and the Persian one imports pearls. And it’s called the port of Mashmahig”) survive and circulate for so many years orally, until they were ultimately included in the Bavli – which, incidentally, circulated orally in the first centuries of its existence?

In February, I organized a Wiko-supported workshop entitled “Rethinking Rabbinic Textuality” in which a wonderful group of friends (including two former Fellows) – Galit Hasan Rokem, Eva Kiesele, Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, James Redfield, and Dina Stein – came from near and far to help me think through this and related matters. One of the methods by which I came to approach the circulation and endurance of Talmudic traditions was by closely examining parallels between the Talmud and those magic bowls that were composed in Babylonian Jewish Aramaic and whose contents seem especially Jewish, and even rabbinic. Since the bowls were produced around the sixth century C.E., they considerably predate the earliest, surviving Talmudic manuscripts, often by more than half a millennium. More importantly, when the bowls’ incantations closely parallel Talmudic traditions, they do so from a position beyond the canon of rabbinic literature, and are thus valuable for contemplating the vibrant, independent existence of these traditions as lived texts, prior to their incorporation in the Talmud and the magic bowls.

In this way it became easier to appreciate how the spells, formulae, phrases, and teachings recorded in the bowls and the Talmud were not singular, ephemeral utterances that happened to survive for centuries, but traces of an endless, incessant chain of iterations surrounding the texts, reminiscent of the writing of the incantation bowls which spools out from the middle of the bowl to its outer rim. While the artifacts themselves were, indeed, written to be buried and never to be read by human eyes, the broader “textscape” of which they were a part was, like an organism in which the circulation of blood is essential

for life, alive in the distribution of ideas and formula between the people of Babylonia, subsequent generations of scholars and producers of “magic,” and, in some ways, until the present day in the form of devotees of the Talmud and “superstitious” peoples who continue to write amulets. In this sense, these traditions are not letters, dead and buried, which miraculously reached us, but representatives of vibrant textual worlds which continue to resonate.

And so, I submit this dispatch from a year of magical thinking at Wiko, with the realization that even if these particular words may be currently limited in their reach, the conversations they emerged from and which they engender embrace many more actors beyond the (valued!) reader reading these particular words. There are, of course, my “fellow” Wiko Fellows, the devoted, unforgettable Wiko staff, the friends I made and the friendships I rekindled in Berlin, and my colleagues, students, and other interlocutors back home and around the world, with whom I am lucky enough to weave new strands of conversation spinning out from my precious time in Berlin.