

A Hebrew Magic Formula in Arabic Script: At the Crossroads of Cultures and Languages in an Ottoman Turkish Manuscript

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Context¹

This paper examines a Hebrew sentence rendered in Arabic script found in an Ottoman manuscript. It appears in *Mecmū'atü'l-Fevā'id*, a composite manuscript housed in the Archaeological Manuscripts Collection (no. 885) of the Istanbul Archaeological Museums Library. Consisting of 182 folios, the manuscript includes a rich assortment of texts in Arabic, Persian, and Ottoman Turkish.² The page on which this prayer is found embodies the manuscript's multilingual and multi-generic character, incorporating Turkish couplets in addition to hadiths and anecdotes in Arabic. Flanking the Hebrew sentence on the left is a Turkish couplet rendering Mīrwais Khān Hotak's laqab (honorific title)³ in verse. Given that Mīrwais Khān's rule in Kandahar spanned from 1709 to 1715, the text likely postdates 1709.

A brief introductory note preceding the sentence identifies it as a prayer from the Torah. While it neither constitutes an actual prayer nor is attested in its complete form in the Tanakh, this sentence contains an excerpt from Exodus 3:14—*Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*—commonly translated as “I Am That I Am,” God's self-identification addressed to Moses at the burning bush. The additional elements in the sentence—*Adonai* (Lord) and *Melekh Malkhei HaMelakhim* (King of Kings of Kings)—are honorific titles used to invoke and describe God in Jewish liturgical tradition.

An examination of the phrase *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh* outside the Torah reveals it to be a popular magic formula in the Jewish magical tradition. For instance, we encounter it in *Sefer Raziel HaMalakh* (i.e., the book of Angel Raziel), a compendium comprising

¹ I would like to express my sincere thanks to Ronny Vollandt for helping me to decipher and translate the Hebrew sentence. I am also grateful to Yaron Ben-Naeh for drawing my attention to the fact that the Hebrew sentence could be a magic formula.

² While the first 39 folios consist of a variety of such short texts, from folio 39 onward, the manuscript contains Hasan Esîrî's historical and geographical work *Mi'yârü'd-Düvel ve Misbârü'l-Milel* completed in 1725. This section thus preserves a hitherto unknown copy of the work. Cf. Göker İnan, “Hasan Esîrî'nin Mi'yârü'd-Düvel ve Misbârü'l-Milel İsimli Tarih ve Coğrafya Eseri (İnceleme-Transkripsiyon)”, PhD diss., Istanbul: Marmara University, 2017, 38–42.

³ “Sikke-i Mîr Veys: Sikke-zed-i dirhem dâru'l-ḡarâr-ı Ḳandehâr / Şâh-ı 'âlem ḡân-ı 'âdil Mîr Veysî-i nâm-dâr.” 7v. See also Orhan Yazıcı, *Timur Şah Dürrânî*, Malatya: Yılmaz Matbaacılık ve Yayıncılık, 2017, 22.

the teachings of knowledge and wisdom, as well as magical formulae revealed to Adam. The book delineates the actions to be taken and the words to be spoken for specific tasks. According to the book, one should recite *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh* to render well water potable by heating it during the first season.⁴

Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh was also frequently inscribed in magical gems and amulets.⁵ Gideon Bohak, in *Ancient Jewish Magic: A History*, presents an example of an amulet written designed to protect a pregnant woman and her unborn child. The most striking aspect of the amulet is that it contains the same expressions from the Hebrew sentence referred to in this paper:

Holy, Holy, Holy ... the God of the gods of spirits for all flesh, **the King of Kings of Kings** [...] **Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh**, God, God, God [...] the holy name of God which was revealed to Moses from within the (burning) bush, YHWH YHW, his name is blessed, **I-am-who-I-am**.⁶

Similarly, though it is plausible that the scribe wrote it for protective purposes, the source of this prayer formula is ambiguous. Typographical errors in the text suggest that he lacked formal knowledge of Hebrew and had copied it from a text or an amulet. Alternatively, he might have heard of it from a Jewish magician or healer⁷ and transcribed it as accurately as he could. In any case, this example deserves attention as an illustration of the eclectic interests and diverse sources available to Ottoman literati.

⁴ The relevant part is “Speak, Heh Yehieh Yedied Adokeh Yedied Yechotzoriya Iyayar Aberesekem Yeh Yeh Yeh Yeh Yeh **Ahieh Asher Ahieh** Zeqoqoveheyi Yehoveh [IHOH].” See *Sepher Rezial Hemelach: The Book of the Angel Rezial*, edited and translated by Steve Savedow, Boston: Weiser Books, 2000, 16-17.

⁵ Gideon Bohak, *Ancient Jewish Magic: A History*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008, 265. For the examples, see *ibid.*, 162, 210, 232.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 337-338.

⁷ Bohak observes that since the Middle Ages, Muslim and Jewish magicians have been influenced by each other’s magical traditions, and highlights *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh* as one of the formulae used by Muslim magicians (“Jewish Magic and Muslim Magic: Mutual Influences in the Middle Ages and Modern Era,” in *Khamsa Khamsa Khamsa: The Evolution of a Motif in Contemporary Israeli Art*, ed. by Shirat-Miriam Shamir & Ido Noy, Jerusalem: L. A. Mayer Museum for Islamic Art, 2018, 177, 181).

Transcription

‘An du ‘ā’-i Tevrāt-ı Şerîf

Azonā ’ī şumāğ mālîḥ melḥiyy hemelūḥîm şehū ehiyyā eşer ehiyyā Azonā ’ī⁸

Corrected version according to Hebrew transliteration:

Shimkha Adonai Melekh Malkhei HaMelakhim shehu Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh Adonai.

Translation

A Prayer from the Noble Torah

Your name is Adonai, King of Kings of Kings; He who is *I Am That I Am*—Adonai!

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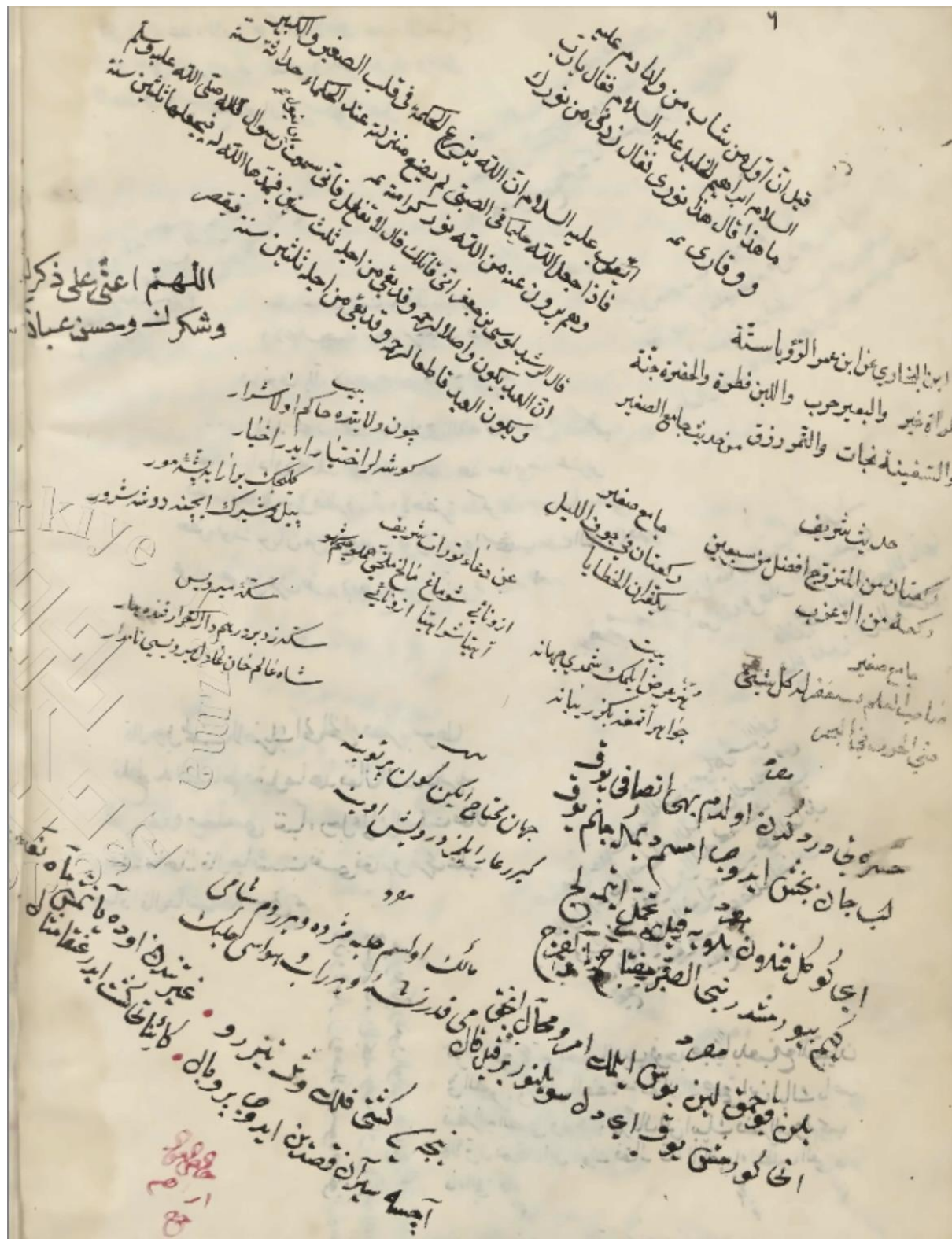
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⁸ This transcription follows standard conventions for rendering Ottoman Turkish into Latin script and reflects the probable pronunciation of the Hebrew sentence at the time of its composition.

Facsimile



Detail

