Three Holy Fools
A Chassidic reading of a Talmudic passage

Midrash Tanḥuma, Numbers, Naso, 16: Rabbi Samuel son of Nahman said: When the Holy Blessed
One created the world, He longed that there be a dwelling for Him in the lower [levels] just as there
is in the upper [levels].

From the Babylonian Talmud, Ketubbot, 17a [with Rashi’s commentary]
1. They said about Rabbi Judah son of Ila’i (mid to late 2nd century CE) that he would take a myrtle
branch and dance before the bride, and say, ‘Pleasant and gracious bride!’

2. Rabbi Samuel son of Rabbi Isaac (3rd – 4th centuries CE) would dance with three [Rashi: three
myrtle branches; he would throw one and catch another (that is, he would juggle them)].

2.1. Rabbi Zera said, ‘The old man / grandfather [that is, Rabbi Samuel] is embarrassing us’ [Rashi:
for he is cheapening the honour of scholars, conducting himself with light-headedness].

2.2. When [Rabbi Samuel son of Rabbi Isaac] died, a pillar of fire intervened between him and
everyone else. (Now, we have learnt that a pillar of fire intervenes only in the case of one or two
people in a generation.)

2.2.1. Rabbi Zera said, ‘This branch (= shōṭ) [Rashi: the myrtle branch with which he would dance] is
beneficial for the old man’;

2.2.2. but some said that [the statement] was, ‘This foolishness (= shaṭut) [Rashi: that he would
conduct himself as a fool] is beneficial for the old man’;

2.2.3. and others say that [the statement] was, ‘This way of thinking (= shitā) [Rashi: his way of
thinking and conducting himself] is beneficial for the old man’.