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Without Bounds

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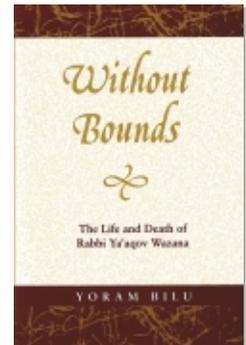
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In the Footsteps of Wazana



This is a book about memories; to be specific, memories shrouded by a haze of yearning and puzzlement. The object of these memories is the shadowy, enigmatic figure of Rabbi Ya'aqov Wazana, a Jewish healer who lived, practiced, and died in the Western High Atlas Mountains of southern Morocco in the early years of this century. Although Wazana forms part of a briskly vanishing past, his image lingers on with the utmost clarity in the minds of those who once knew him, people now residing in Israel's cities, development towns, and *moshavim*. "There was nobody like Wazana in all Morocco," summarized one informant, his voice mellow with fondness and admiration, as he thought back on the marvelous acts, the healing in particular, Wazana performed for Jewish and Muslim patients alike. "When we had no doctors, he was our only physician," was the conclusion of another.

There is no doubt that Wazana's life is obscured in mystery. The puzzle of his lifestyle, his contradiction-ridden personality, the miracles, and above all, the story of his death, still haunt his former associates and friends. Impervious to time, this enigma lives on, powerful as it ever was. At family and social gatherings, Wazana is a perennial topic of conversation; past patients continue to pray for his assistance in times of hardship or sickness. Forty-five years have lapsed since his death, and many still reach out to him in their dreams.

It is for all these people, my informants, that I wish to provide a voice, hoping that along the way I will not only capture their memories and longings, but also the mystery and tension conjured by the name of Wazana. Making use of the tales recounted to me in Hebrew and Moroccan Arabic, I have endeavored to outline a portrait of Wazana

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that I believe sheds light on his elusive image. In unraveling the riddles of his life and death, we embark on a journey through time and space, back to the reality once experienced by the traditional Jewish communities of South Morocco in the 1930s and 1940s. But before setting out on this dark and winding road, it is important to note that the figure awaiting us at the end is indeed a slippery and elusive one. Even those acquainted with Wazana, whose roots sprang from the same cultural soil as his, have failed to understand him fully. How then can a researcher from another time and culture comprehend this remarkable individual? Similarly, even if that researcher possesses extensive knowledge of the society that gave birth to Wazana, and a deep appreciation of its cultural codes, there is every likelihood that the effort to cross the ocean of informants' stories and reappear with the "real" Wazana exposed, will probably prove futile. For we must bear in mind that a personality is more than just an abstract of cultural symbols (cf. D'Andrade and Strauss 1992; Spiro 1993; Strauss and Quinn 1997). This is especially pertinent when the personality in the spotlight is as rare and unusual as Wazana's. Second, if stories telling of the past are the only means at our disposal of shedding light on a bygone figure, then the chances are that the illumination will prove very faint indeed. Experienced clinicians are often thwarted in their efforts to delve into the human psyche—even when the object of their examination stands before them unmediated and exposed to their scrutiny. The task becomes significantly more intimidating when the figure under investigation has no independent life other than that existing in the memories of others.

By far the greatest obstacle in the quest for Wazana is the circuitous layers of mediation interposed between subject and researcher (Bertaux 1981). Regardless of the depth of the inquiry, we cannot expect to arrive at a reliable biography based on any verifiable historical reality from the stories gleaned from the healer's acquaintances. In a sense, the Wazana narratives are created the moment they are spoken: they are replete with personal evaluations and interpretations no less than with actual facts (cf. Bruner 1991; Crites 1986; Gergen and Gergen 1983; Good 1994: ch. 6; and Schafer 1981). Furthermore, the informants' memories have been, and continue to be, affected by their experiences in the present. Thus, even if the stories describe actual events that did occur, we must consider that they are inevitably influenced by the flaws of human memory. Distortions creep in, and over time, become increasingly important as the informants' present lives become more deeply entrenched in their Israeli experience, and the distance between the past in the Atlas Mountains and the present in Israel continues to expand. Some informants offered personal impressions of encounters with Wazana apparently rich in detail and seeming to carry the stamp of reliability and realism. However, we should not infer historical truth from such stories simply because they seem to proffer nuggets of everyday reality in the Atlas Mountains. The

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problem of historical veracity is exacerbated if we consider that most stories were exclusive (i.e., belonged to only one specific informant), and could not be validated by additional sources.

In contrast to the category of unique, personal stories, there were other stories, which, apart from minor modifications, appeared to be common to several informants. Note however that due to their obviously legendary qualities, the “shared” accounts must be taken as particularly problematic to obtaining a reliable portrait of Wazana. In this category are legendary accounts full of supernatural elements—saints (*tsaddiqim*), demons, and acts of magic, such as traveling great distances in no time, producing barrenness by sorcery, or locating lost objects or money by magic. Since the majority of readers would not accept beings such as demons, or activities such as magic as givens in their social universe, their presence in Wazana’s story may be hard to digest. Still, before dismissing such phenomena as figments of the imagination, we must bear in mind that the events we are about to encounter were an inherent part of an authentic cultural experience particular to traditional Moroccan life, and that for Jews and Muslims alike, saints, demons and sorcery formed part of normal, day to day reality (see Crapanzano 1973, 1980).

This book is not concerned with challenging the reliability of the personal or the more “realistic” type of story, nor does it intend to speculate about the veracity of the seemingly legendary narratives. I propose instead that the entire corpus of Wazana stories, including those with the troublesome combination of spectacular feats and everyday minutiae, expresses an intrinsic truth peculiar to the informants’ narrative perspective and thus endows the figure of Wazana with meaning (Bruner 1990, 1991; Spence 1982). However, the fact that our perception of Wazana is filtered through the informants’ eyes does not mean we have to buy their portrait of him wholesale. The fact, for example, that many of the people believe in demons does not mean we have to, and in no way does it rule out a discussion of demons as metaphorical rather than ontological characters, or the use of analytic tools foreign to the cultural system that produces demons.

The attempt to expose Wazana’s long-vanished figure demands great delicacy given the difficulties that beset quests such as this into the past. We clearly cannot expect to garner the “real” Wazana from the wealth of stories about him; at best, we can present a coherent reading, perhaps one of many possible chronicles of his life. This book will concentrate on the perceptions of Wazana held by people who have been molding his image for decades, and on the ways they have chosen to represent him to this researcher. The complexity generated by the extensive layers of mediation asks for an interpretation of Wazana from a number of perspectives on distinct analytic levels. Particularly, a two-tiered approach is needed, one involving an exploration of Wazana’s unique personality, combined with

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an analysis of the cultural context and lexicon of symbols relevant to the healer and his acquaintances (cf. Bourguignon 1979; Ingham 1996; Kilborne and Langness 1987; and Obeyesekere 1981). My examination of the healer's life thus involves the integrated exploration of the individual and his society from both the psychological and anthropological points of view. The analysis will track Wazana's life narrative as it was reported by the informants.¹

I came across Wazana first in early 1975, and the passing years have in no way reduced my fascination with this character. Just like his acquaintances, I have been enthralled by the wake of mystery and nostalgia he left behind. This preoccupation has taken me on a journey countless miles long, up and down the country—from the northern Lebanese border, to the southern development towns in the Negev. With an address book that swelled steadily with names of people who shared their secrets and memories, I set out to collect every crumb of information related to this remarkable character, trying to construct a coherent portrait out of the rich, often bizarre mosaic pieces supplied by his family and acquaintances. The result is here before you. The picture of Wazana arising from these pages has no pretense of being exhaustive or entirely coherent, since the riddle of Wazana's life may never be fully solved. Nonetheless, I have no doubt that his story is well worth the telling.