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Without Bounds

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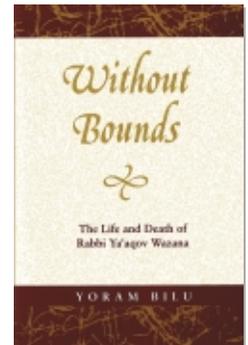
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3

Ait Wazana



These are the generations of the Wazana family as revealed to us by its oldest descendant, Ya'aqov son of Rabbi Yaish, at his home in Pardes Hana:

Rabbi Avraham begot David who begot Avraham and my esteemed father, Yaish. And Rabbi David had many children whom he sent forth to different towns saying: "Go out and live by what you find." To them he bequeathed a bountiful inheritance which they received from the towns of Ait Wauzgit, Agouim, and Sour. Rabbi Avraham Wazana, son of Rabbi David and brother of my father [Rabbi Yaish], went to Ait Wauzgit, where he found a wife and begot Ya'aqov in Assarag, in Tifnoute. I too was named Ya'aqov by my father.

This chronicle describes the generations of the Wazana family. The founder of the dynasty was Rabbi Avraham, known as el-Kebir, ("The Great"), to distinguish him from his grandson Rabbi Avraham, father of Rabbi Ya'aqov. His son, Rabbi David, bestowed on his many descendants a birth-right of areas of religious authority.¹ As we shall hear later, the Jews acknowledged the privileges handed down by the early Wazana forebears (*zekhut avot*), and assiduously took care of their descendants' sustenance.

The above description of a four-generation family tree was provided by Ya'aqov son of Yaish who, like the hero of our story, the healer Ya'aqov son of Avraham, is the great-grandson of the dynasty founder, Rabbi Avraham "The Great." The historical accuracy of this interviewee's information is questionable considering his comment that Rabbi Avraham, and another ten sages, were exiled to Morocco from Jerusalem after the

Chapter 3

destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans (in the first century C.E.). This particular detail is a typical theme in the legendary genre establishing the antecedents of Moroccan *tsaddiqim*; the legends of many of the saints often place their subjects in the Holy Land prior to their appearance in Morocco, depicting this as the consequence of exile (Ben-Ami 1984: 41). This “historical depth” thus establishes the figure of Rabbi Avraham as a recognizable legendary archetype, but it is probably illusory. Search as we might, we were unsuccessful in unearthing any missing links in the family genealogy supporting this version’s historicity.²

The advent of Rabbi Avraham el-Kebir in southern Morocco is particularly dramatic, and his travels through the Dra Valley on the road to Ouarzazate, where he first comes to light,³ are replete with miracles, as befits a great *tsaddiq*. According to the legend, Rabbi Avraham was traveling toward “an Arab town full of bandits and murderers,” on the banks of the Dra River, when he altered his course to visit an ancient Jewish cemetery, intending to pray at the abandoned graves. Upon reaching the cemetery, he discovered an Arab shepherd grazing his flocks. The *tsaddiq* ordered the shepherd to leave the holy site, but the latter stubbornly refused, threatening to kill Rabbi Avraham. As a punishment, the Arab’s gun was turned to stone and his entire flock became headstones. News of the miracle spread to the town, and the local ruler decided to ride out to meet the saint, to apologize for the incident and mollify the holy man. Rabbi Avraham asked the ruler to erect a wall around the cemetery, which he did, and the local Arabs were ordered to carry out this task. The wall was erected in two days, and the sage was finally escorted into the town amidst great ceremony and rejoicing.

The townspeople implored Rabbi Avraham to stay, but he was determined to continue on his way. He set out again, reaching his next destination in a trice, due to the miracle of *qfitsat haderekh* (“contraction of the road”; see Ben-Ami 1984: 66; Willner 1969: 295). On Friday afternoon, Rabbi Avraham, accompanied by a sizable escort consisting of Jews and Arabs, decided to halt beside the spring of Eben Zagart, in the area known as Frenin. It was just before the Sabbath, and the saint, not wishing to profane the holy day by continuing on his way, sent his escort back to their homes. The Muslims thereupon returned to Dra, while Rabbi Avraham dispatched the Jews to Ouarzazate to inform the community to expect his arrival once the Sabbath was over. The messengers’ traveling time was miraculously foreshortened. Upon hearing of Rabbi Avraham’s decision to spend the night at the spring, the Jews of Ouarzazate were seized by terror since the place was believed to be haunted by bandits and wild beasts. Indeed, the saint was attacked by local Arabs but they became paralyzed whenever they approached him. All the while, the sage went on quietly preparing his Sabbath meal, engrossed in prayer. The Arabs eventually fled, leaving Rabbi Avraham all alone in the wilderness.

With nightfall, the rabbi found himself surrounded by lions, tigers, hyenas, and snakes which did him no harm. They were sent by Elijah the Prophet to protect the *tsaddiq*. Indeed, throughout the night, the mystical figure of Elijah appeared on the hilltop overlooking the spring, maintaining an all-night vigil, drawn rifle at the ready.

Rabbi Avraham spent the Sabbath in prayer and study. After performing the *havdalah* (the ritual to mark the close of the Sabbath), one of the lions turned to him angrily and said: “Rabbi Avraham Wazana, is it permissible to fast on the Sabbath? Do we have to fast while you eat?” The lion begged the saint to depart so that the beasts might eat. However the Rabbi declared: “I will not move until people arrive with transport to escort me away from here.” The lion responded, “You have no need of horses, climb on my back, and I will bear you where you wish”; and the Rabbi was thus transported to Ouarzazate on the back of a lion, the other lions racing in convoy around them. Meanwhile, the town’s Jews were in deep mourning, convinced that the *tsaddiq* could not have possibly survived a night alone in the wilderness. They even hired Arabs to search for his remains. Their amazement, at the spectacle of Rabbi Avraham entering through the city gates, mounted on a lion, with an escort of lions, knew no bounds. Some tried to attack the lions, but were frozen to the spot whenever they approached the cavalcade, which made its way through narrow streets to the *mellah* (Jewish quarter). Rabbi Avraham then commanded the elders to feed the lions with the remains of the Sabbath meal to reward their work. Finally, he uttered the divine name and the beasts vanished into the air.

Rabbi Avraham’s remarkable entry into Ouarzazate established him in the minds of the local Jews as a saint and miracle-worker, preparing the way for the emergence of *ait Wazana* as a holy dynasty. It was no surprise that varying versions of this legend were told by Rabbi Avraham’s descendants in Israel, or that the events were augmented with colorful details accentuating the family’s ancestral merit (*zekhut avot*). The miracles that Rabbi Avraham performed on his journey through the Dra Valley to Ouarzazate—overpowering Arab assailants, the incident in the desecrated cemetery, and the cemetery’s subsequent restoration, traveling great distances in a flash, and supremacy over wild beasts—these are all standard saint legend motifs (Ben-Ami 1984: 56–68). It is very unusual, however, for all of these to appear in one story, and the fact that they do is impressive justification for the family’s claim to holy status. The young Rabbi Ya’aqov would no doubt have heard these and related stories, and we may conjecture that the legends bolstered his faith in his own powers resulting in his characteristic confidence and sense of purpose.

The saintly Rabbi Avraham bowed to the appeals of the Jews of Ouarzazate, remained in their city, and subsequently married a local

Chapter 3

woman. A year later, a son, David, was born and, even as a young man, showed signs of inheriting his father's merit.⁴ The legend, which occurred prior to David's marriage at the age of sixteen, offers testimony to his supernatural powers: "There was a young girl from Ouarzazate who owned a beautiful hen with brightly colored feathers. This hen would follow the child wherever she went, and even slept next to her. One day, the girl was playing with the *kaid's* [local ruler] children when the *kaid's* daughter grabbed the hen and took it to her mother who thereupon slaughtered it." When news of the Jewish girl's distress over the loss of her pet reached David's ears, a miracle occurred. As the *kaid's* wife sat plucking the dead hen, the feathers she plucked became fastened to her face. Try as she might the woman could not free herself of the feathers because Rabbi David had declared that, "The one who stole the chicken will be transformed into a chicken, and the one who caused its death will surely die." The first part of the curse came true immediately as the *kaid's* daughter became a chicken and went strutting after the Jewish child. Rabbi David was ordered before the *kaid* and offered the latter a cruel choice: "If I restore your daughter, your wife will die, and if you choose your wife's life, your child will remain a chicken for the rest of her days." The *kaid* asked for his daughter back, and Rabbi David ordered him to shut his eyes. When he looked again, his daughter was standing before him. However, upon returning home, the *kaid* found his wife's lifeless body. Following this incident, word of Rabbi David's powers spread far and wide. Shortly afterwards, his father arranged for him to be married to a girl from the community. According to one version of this legend, Rabbi David married the chicken's owner.

An echo of this story, which starts out innocently enough as a fairy tale, but ends with a ruthless act of vengeance and death, may be heard in the events surrounding Rabbi Ya'akov's death. As we shall see, although differing in detail, the legends share a structure that is strikingly similar.

A year after Rabbi David's marriage, his father, Rabbi Avraham, died. The legends surrounding his death, which are replete with miracles, are consistent with his eminence as a *tsaddiq* of great merit. In conformity with the customary model, the principal miracle entails prediction of the time of his own death. According to one extant version, on the night he died Rabbi Avraham invited two hundred scholars to join him in a feast. Following the afternoon and evening prayers, Rabbi Avraham requested the assembly to recite the prayer Shema Yisrael three times, and then to read from the Book of Psalms until midnight. At the stroke of midnight the sages were gradually overcome by sleep, and no one was awake to witness the Rabbi's soul depart. Straight after his passing, Rabbi Avraham informed his best pupil in a dream that his body was lying ready and awaiting burial in the cemetery at Ait Budiel. Upon awakening, the company of sages discovered the Rabbi's disappearance and hired an

experienced Arab horseman to ride to Ait Budiel to search for the body. Rabbi David intervened and had the Arab transported miraculously to the cemetery where he discovered the saint's body already washed and wrapped in shrouds. A gathering of local Jews and Arabs was already waiting there since the Rabbi had also appeared to a righteous woman in her dream, revealing the whereabouts of his body. When the Arab reported his findings to the Jews of Ouarzazate, many were dismayed to learn that the *tsaddiq* should be buried far from their town. Rabbi David thereupon begged the community to honor his father's wish saying, "Do not move my father's body. I will take his place when the time comes: let him be buried there [in Ait Budiel] and I will be buried in Ouarzazate."

The nuclear motifs appearing in the legend of Rabbi Avraham's death recur in the death stories of other members of the family: foreknowledge of the hour of death which allows the *tsaddiq* to prepare, asking to be buried in a remote cemetery, and the involvement of a Muslim horseman are common elements in the death legends of Rabbi Avraham and the father of our protagonist, Rabbi Ya'aqov.

Within a short time, the tomb at Ait Budiel became known as a holy site, the destination of pilgrims and the source of omens and miracles. There is a story that when the French elected to pave a road through the cemetery, their trespass on the *tsaddiq*'s realm was paid for with the lives of several workers, forcing the project to be abandoned. Close by the tomb runs a stream renowned for its supernatural powers: "The waters rise and fall like a fountain, and any attempt to divert its water is punished with instant death." On a visit to Morocco some years ago, Shaul Wazana and his brother went to see the tomb of Ait Budiel. They found it still intact, on the banks of a newly constructed artificial lake.

Rabbi Avraham's famed entry through the gates of Ouarzazate, and the subsequent miracles, established the Wazana family name solidly among the firmament of southern Moroccan saints. The wonders performed by his son and successor, Rabbi David, further consolidated the family's *zekhut avot*, which was handed down the generations in an unbroken line. The story of Rabbi David's great miracle, which placed him in the position to bequeath his legacy and birthright upon his descendants, is an excellent example of the scope of his powers. Not only did mortal beings, Jews and Arabs alike, as well as subjects of the animal kingdom, answer to his bidding, but as we shall see now, also the inhabitants of the "other world," the demons (Arabic: *jnun*), were subservient to his will.

Once, the legend goes, Rabbi David was invited to visit the Jewish quarter (*mellah*) of Sour, a village situated somewhere between Assarag and Agouim, west of Ouarzazate, to bestow his blessing on fifteen young brides. The day appointed for the weddings was Thursday, and Rabbi David agreed to arrive the day before. Thus, on Wednesday morning he ordered his messenger to harness the horse in readiness for the journey.

Chapter 3

The messenger expressed doubt that they would arrive in Sour on time, reminding the Rabbi that “the journey from here [Ouarzazate] to Sour cannot normally be done in less than three days.” The *tsaddiq* ignored this, and whipping up the horse, raced over the villages of Amassine and Agouim, arriving at Sour that very day. Upon arrival they were puzzled that no one came to greet them. However, an old woman they happened across explained that the whole community had gone down to the river with the brides and grooms. “At that time the Jews had no *mikveh* [ritual bath] in which the brides and grooms could immerse themselves and therefore used the river.” As the old woman finished speaking, cries were heard coming from the direction of the river. Rabbi David hastened over and learned that the first bride to enter the water had disappeared beneath the surface. The Jews of Sour were terrified and shocked, feelings of anguish and grief quickly replacing their earlier expressions of happiness and joy.

According to the legend, Rabbi David remained composed and quickly ordered the community leaders to erect a large tent and call everyone inside. When all were gathered, he told them to remain silent and motionless until his task was done. He then proceeded to divide the people into two groups, marking the border between them with his silver-handled walking cane which was covered with his cape. Before the eyes of the astonished assembly, the Rabbi pronounced a magic formula, at which flames erupted out from beneath the cane, followed in quick succession by a cloud of mysterious spirits rising from the ground. The spirits sought to approach the *tsaddiq* in order to kiss and embrace him, but Rabbi David rebuked them gravely, saying: “You evildoers, have you no shame? Does it not say in the holy Scriptures, ‘Daughter of such a one is destined for the son of such a one even if they are from different lands?’⁵ And have you not transgressed the holy commandments ... by snatching her just before the *sheva brakhot* [the seven blessings for the bride and groom which form part of the wedding ceremony]?” The spirits from under the ground that were, in fact, none other than demons, swore that they had had no hand in the deed but Rabbi David did not relent. He continued summoning them, legion after legion, until only a single blind demon remained in the river. To force the last demon to appear, the *tsaddiq* captured the rest inside the tent, compelling them to stand, hands folded behind their backs in submission, and announced that “none would go free until the missing girl was returned.” At this, the blind demon appeared, and indeed it was he who had stolen the young girl for his bride. Trembling before the *tsaddiq*, he told how he had taken the girl because, “she entered the river and didn’t call on the name of the Holy One Blessed Be He.” According to another version, the girl wounded the demon’s eyes as she was bathing and was snatched away in revenge.⁶

After assuring himself that no intimacy had taken place between demon and human, that the girl had eaten nothing in the kingdom of the

spirits, and that her clothing had been restored, Rabbi David commanded the demon to return the girl. As the community watched, amazed, the trembling, weeping girl suddenly reappeared. The *tsaddiq* then commanded her captor to remove all the golden jewels he had given her, forcing him to swear to leave her alone forever. “You are forbidden to cross her path ever again. If you approach her, you will surely die.” Saying which, the Rabbi struck the ground with his cane, and the demonic legions vanished as though they had never been. The brides finally resumed their immersions in preparation for their nuptials, leaving the bewildered Jews crowding round the *tsaddiq* to receive his blessing. In their gratitude, they vowed to take care of his sustenance for the rest of his days.

Rabbi David’s clear-headed response to the pledges borne on this tide of emotion marks the point at which his own, and his father’s charisma became institutionalized as a permanent family resource. He admonished the Jews of Sour against empty promises, saying: “He who makes a vow and does not fulfill it—will be punished by death.” He offered an alternative whereby “whoever owns one hundred cows will set aside the butter produced in a day. He can enjoy the milk, but the butter must be collected. Anyone who reaps from the wheat or the barley should set aside a tithe. And anyone who returns from a journey [on business] should set aside a tithe [of the profit]. Further, whenever you hear the name Wazana, when someone bearing that name comes to ask something of you, you shall present it to him.”

It is to this system of earmarked allocations that the Wazana family refers when speaking of “the inheritance that was bequeathed [by Rabbi Avraham] in Ait Wauzgit.”⁷⁷ With regard to Ya’aqov Wazana, the healer, interviewees outside the family circle left us in no doubt that the “inheritance” was a real aspect of their lives in Morocco: “none of us [the Jewish population] would touch it [the produce]. It was his father’s inheritance, his father’s merit,” explained Rabbi Yitzhak Peḥima. Peḥima, a one-time resident of Imini and Agouim, recalled how, “we all used to give him donations. Tithes.” Rabbi Moshe Tubul, the *shoḥet*, healer, and scribe from Amassine, noted that “people set up a sort of fund for Rabbi Ya’aqov; he came around every month or two, and took what we set aside for him. He knew the gifts were waiting. We gave it to him because of his father—because of his forebears’ privilege.” According to Eliyahu Tubul, who came from the same village as Rabbi Ya’aqov, his father, Rabbi Avraham, had been “a great rabbi and at the beginning of each month we used to give him gifts from our crops, or else some sheep or cattle. If he didn’t receive something at the beginning of the month, then the cows would stop producing—no calves, no milk ...” The Wazana family enjoyed this arrangement in Morocco, and at least one of them, namely blind Shaul Wazana, still does in his own way.

Chapter 3

The miracle performed by Rabbi David in Sour is of particular interest in light of the association his descendant, our protagonist, had with the demonic world. These ties apparently spring from an established family tradition wherein the *tsaddiq* held incontrovertible mastery over “those underground,” that is, the demons. However, there is a marked difference between Rabbi David’s relationship and attitude toward the demons and that of Rabbi Ya’aqov. In contrast to Wazana’s tendency to smudge or remove the boundaries between the human and the demonic, the miraculous incident at Sour serves to emphasize the scrupulous segregation between the two worlds. Rabbi David is uncompromisingly meticulous in ensuring that no mark of impurity from the “other” world remains to sully the abducted bride. The girl is restored to her “natural” place (under the wedding canopy, next to her intended husband), and the demon is forced to swear never to approach her again. These segregative precautions represent a far cry from the behavior of Rabbi Ya’aqov, who, in explicit contradiction of his illustrious grandfather’s act of restoration, takes a demonic wife—rather than a human bride.

The central role of the blind demon in this story is of great interest in light of the fact that blindness is common to the Wazana family. “In our family when you reach the age of sixty or seventy, you turn blind,” commented blind, old Ya’aqov Wazana from Pardes Hana with resignation. And as if to emphasize this fact, we were joined in the interview by his brother Avraham, also blind. The best known of the Wazana brothers in Israel, Shaul, has been blind from childhood, while the eldest brother, Yitzhak, who is no longer alive, lost his sight a short time before he died. According to Ya’aqov Wazana, neither his cousin, the hero of our story, nor his father, Rabbi Avraham, were spared this fate. Indeed, two of the interviewees who had known Rabbi Ya’aqov well in Morocco, claimed that the healer’s eyesight had deteriorated in his latter years, even though he never suffered total loss of sight. From Rabbi Ya’aqov’s elderly cousin we also learned that the healer experienced temporary loss of sight during the year he spent in Casablanca. The interviewee explicitly linked this occurrence to Rabbi Ya’aqov’s marriage to the she-demon (to be dealt with in full later).

What is the cause of the Wazana family’s blindness? The older Wazana men, all of them blind, can offer no satisfactory explanation. However, one of Shaul’s younger sons did hint at the possible reason for their reluctance to talk about it. He suggested that the blindness was the result of a curse which had been placed on one of the Wazana ancestors following some dispute over the naming of a newborn. It is tempting, in Rabbi Ya’aqov’s case, to forge some kind of inverse association between his partial sight loss toward the end of his life, and the trait that so clearly characterized his actions—namely his insistence on *looking* into the forbidden, his tendency to expose things preferably left

concealed. We will examine this trait later, in our detailed exploration of Wazana's personality.

The deterioration from the ranks of the powerful and illustrious previously enjoyed by the Wazana family during its Moroccan heyday, to the humble standing characterizing it today, is somewhat problematic, and even painful. It is apparent that while certain historical Wazana *tsaddiqim* continue to be venerated by Moroccan immigrants from Tidili, Tifnoute, Ouarzazate, and Skoura,⁸ contemporary members of the family lack the prestige that surrounded their ancestors. The disparity between interviewee Ya'aqov Wazana's past and present standard of living reflects one aspect of this decline. "When we lived in Ouarzazate, we were very rich. We had a dozen houses that people rented from us. Our home also served as the synagogue, and three *minyanim* [prayer groups] would pray there each day and join the family for meals. I used to be a salesman, and traveled all around the villages. Then the French came along and brought their own kind of blessing. I had a cement factory with a hundred and forty workers. We abandoned it all to come to Israel." His arrival in Israel, as an older man, heralded a significant fall in fortune: initially working for the Jewish National Fund, he barely managed to scrape together a living as a farm laborer. Of all the Wazana family, Shaul is the most widely known among immigrants from southern Morocco. As we have noted, he visits their different communities, attending every *hillula* in memory of the *tsaddiqim*, and exchanging blessings for money and good humor. Nonetheless, even Shaul, who corresponds most closely to the old-time Wazana *tsaddiqim*, is merely a pale reminder of his forebears. His large circle of acquaintances might marvel at his astounding ability to remember everyone he meets, and may accept his blessings gladly, but they tend to doubt that he possesses any special powers.

Wazana's family and certain acquaintances hotly contend that *ait* Wazana's erudition and powers equal those of *ait* Abu-Hatsera. If this is indeed so, then it is puzzling to find that in Israel at least, one family flourishes and is respected, while the other has difficulty maintaining its standing within a small peripheral group of Moroccan Jews. Old Ya'aqov Wazana told me of a bitter argument that occurred between the leading representatives of the two families—Rabbi Avraham "the Great" and Rabbi Ya'aqov Abu-Hatsera—on a point of scholarship. He declined, however, to elaborate on the significance or consequence of the disagreement. I certainly sensed tacit resentment toward the rival family, who, in his opinion, has no superior claim to the *zekhut* than he does, but nevertheless enjoys immense prestige among the former Moroccan community in Israel. An explanation for this disparity in status offered by a younger member of the Wazana family does not flatter the house of Abu-Hatsera. According to this source, although the families are essentially

Chapter 3

equal, Abu-Ḥatsera's preeminence in Israel is largely thanks to the greater humility of the Wazana clan.

Whatever the reason for the decline in fortune in Israel, the life of Rabbi Ya'aqov the healer, as we shall see from the coming chapters, is the dramatic epitome of this "degeneration." This man, the historical link between the early Wazana *tsaddiqim* and their present-day descendants, used his family privileges for his own crooked and tortuous ends. It was a path foreign in every sense to that trodden by his esteemed forefathers, and one that would ultimately lead to his ruin.