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Without Bounds

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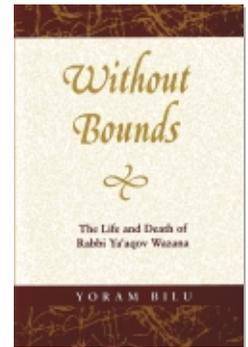
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5

Wazana and His Parents



Rabbi Avraham and his wife Esther had many children (according to one version, twelve), but apart from Ya’aqov and his sister Hana, all of them died in infancy. Thus, Rabbi Ya’aqov was the only surviving son, and this singularity served to intensify the powerful parent-child bond. As I will show, the strong attachment between the healer and his parents was largely responsible for his peculiar lifestyle.

Rabbi Avraham is described as a worthy and steadfast heir to the privileges bequeathed by his ancestors. He was, by all accounts, a pious scholar whose spiritual learning was his sole vocation. In contrast to his son Ya’aqov, he never used *ktiva* (writing) for healing: “His father never wrote [amulets]; he just blessed people and they would all get better.” It was the father’s custom to visit the different communities of the Tifnoute region, giving his blessing to the Jews he met in return for liberal gifts of their produce. The local Jews regarded Rabbi Avraham as a *tsaddiq*, and the story of his death, which is typical of Jewish Moroccan saint legends, reflects this fact very clearly (see Ben Ami 1984: 63–64). One description of his death is as follows:

Rabbi Avraham traveled to Talouine [a village in the south of the Tifnoute region] to collect donations. He was given oil and honey. This was his gift. During the evening prayers he told them [the congregants]: “You must read the Shema Yisrael; it is time for me to die,” and he asked to be buried in Tazenakht [about 90 km east of Talouine]. He promised that his body would be as light as a feather. They replied: “It can’t be [that you’re going to die]. You are a

Chapter 5

tsaddiq.” An Arab passerby overheard all this and said, “If he dies, I will take him to the place where he will be buried—it will take three days.” The Arab said this jokingly, in scorn. He wasn’t serious. When they finished praying, the Rabbi said “Shema Yisrael” and fell down dead.

When the Arab went to sleep, Rabbi Avraham came to him and began choking him. He said that if he didn’t get up he would finish him off. The next day the Arab ran over to the *hazan*’s [local rabbi] house, and [asked him] to take Rabbi Avraham. They tied the *tsaddiq* to a mule and his body was so light it took them one day instead of three to reach Tazenakht, which is where they buried him.

Most other versions of Rabbi Avraham’s death story correspond to the above version in all the main details except for the locations of his death and burial. Most interviewees, including one woman who said that Rabbi Avraham had stayed in her father’s house in Amassine the day before he died, claimed that the *tsaddiq*’s body had been transported miraculously from Amassine to Tamzersht, and not from Talouine to Tazenakht. According to the informants, Rabbi Avraham’s burial in Tamzersht as opposed to Assarag, his home, was due to the religious and spiritual merit of the Tamzersht community: “There were more Jews there, and greater holiness, they prayed more and showed more respect. They respected everything. Everyone was sympathetic to everyone else.” In this statement, made by someone from Tamzersht, we have an allusion to the deterioration in Jewish life that took place in Assarag, the village where Rabbi Ya’aqov was born and where he spent most his life. Tamu Tubul of Assarag also maintained that Tamzersht had been a place of holiness (“that’s where the great *tsaddiqim* are buried”), and referred to the local Arab population as *shurfa* (descendants of the prophet). This direct lineage to Mohammed accorded them an aura of holiness from which the Muslims, but also the Jews of the village, could benefit. It is no surprise that Muslim piety and virtue is offered as a reason for the *tsaddiq*’s burial in Tamzersht. We must bear in mind the closeness of the relationship that existed between the two communities, and in particular, the fact that in the Atlas Mountains, Jewish and Muslim saint cults had many elements in common (see Ben-Ami 1984: 166–84; and Goldberg 1992). This explanation is certainly acceptable in light of the intimate involvement of Rabbi Ya’aqov in Muslim customs and beliefs (to be discussed later). Having said that, there is also the possibility that Tamu’s explanation reflects her own warm sentiments toward what she calls “the good Arabs of Morocco.” Her version of the story of Rabbi Avraham’s death presents the figure of the Arab in a positive light from the outset, and makes no claim of Arab disrespect toward the *tsaddiq*. According to her, the Arab

Wazana and His Parents

is the first to bring word of the *tsaddiq*'s death, having experienced a vision of Rabbi Avraham, who appeared to him with "an angel hovering above him and rays of light illuminating his face."

An examination of Jewish Moroccan saint legends reveals that it is not uncommon for a *tsaddiq* to request burial somewhere other than his home village or the place of his death.¹ In the majority of cases, the request ascribed to the saint appears in fact to conceal a long history of struggle between two Jewish communities, each desirous for the *tsaddiq*'s resting place within its domain so that the community can continue to benefit from his blessing. Such contests invariably resulted in victory for the larger, more central community, and this pattern of burial relocation therefore mirrors a facet of the social reality of these communities in the early twentieth century. The small, isolated mountain settlements emptied as their inhabitants migrated to the main towns. The burial of these "mobile *tsaddiqim*" therefore reflects the movement toward the new Jewish concentrations on the frequently changing map of southern Morocco. An echo of the fierce inter-community competition emerges in the story of a former resident of Tamzersht who said that, in defiance of the *tsaddiq*'s categorical request, the Jews of Amassine insisted on burying him in their own cemetery. However, when they tried to lift the body, it was as heavy "as all this" (the speaker denoted the neighboring tenements seen through his window), and could not be moved from the spot. Finally, they agreed to carry him to Tamzersht, whereupon his body became as light as a feather.

Most of the interviewees were in agreement regarding the date of Rabbi Avraham's death, a missing detail in the version cited earlier. The death occurred during the festival of Hanukka, in the winter month of Tevet, and a thick blanket of snow over the mountains added significantly to the spectacular nature of the burial party's trek from Amassine to Tamzersht. That the journey only took a fraction of the normal time was all the more miraculous, given the challenging weather conditions and the fact that, as one version states, the Jews of Amassine had been ordered by the *tsaddiq* "not to take me by horse, but to carry me yourselves." Whether an animal with an Arab driver made the journey to Tamzersht, or a cortege of Jews struggling through the snow bearing the body of the *tsaddiq* on their shoulders, a considerable distance was covered in next to no time. One interviewee described it as "the same distance as from here [Be'er Sheva] to Haifa on foot [over 200 km]." "The men who carried him said he weighed less than half a kilo, as the saint did not wish to weary them, and rather than taking ten hours it only took two," marveled an informant from Tamzersht.

The motif of the miraculous reduction in travel time also occurs in other legends of *tsaddiqim* in the Wazana family, and signifies the elimination of the constraints of time and space. In much the same way

as the presence of thick snow makes the ease and speed of travel seem so miraculous, so the particular day of the week on which the burial takes place is miraculous. Traditionally, the perfect day for a *tsaddiq* to die is a Friday, owing to its proximity to the holy Sabbath day. Furthermore, many legends contain an element of tension over whether the *tsaddiq* can indeed be laid to rest in time for the Sabbath. The suspense ends when time itself stands still and allows the funeral to proceed without desecrating the Sabbath.² Rabbi Avraham's death fits into this pattern: his body was carried from Amassine on Friday morning and the burial was completed in Tamzersht that same afternoon. Further miracles occurred; the grave was found already prepared to receive the body, although no human hands had touched it, and having completed their task, the burial party had time to reach home "with the sun still hanging in the sky" (the Sabbath begins one hour before sunset).

If the *tsaddiq* can ensure his burial to be as near as possible to the Sabbath (to benefit from its holiness), this means in fact that he can control the hour of his death. This allows the *tsaddiq* to prepare himself accordingly, and even to orchestrate the surrounding circumstances in order to increase the inherent sanctity and purity of his death. One informant gave details of the ritual purification that Rabbi Avraham discharged in preparation for his death (in addition to the prayers and recital of the Shema in the synagogue). According to this account, he immersed himself in the ritual pool (*mikveh*), trimmed his hair, and fasted until his death. These preparations serve to reinforce the dimensions of sanctity in the death story which, in any case, contains many miraculous elements. Most of these miracles—foreknowledge of the hour of death, imposition of the *tsaddiq's* will on a rebellious Arab, and the "contraction of the road" (*qfitsat haderekb*)—are frequent motifs in the death legends of Jewish Moroccan saints, and of the saints of the Wazana family in particular.

Most informants agree that young Ya'aqov Wazana (one version states that he was twelve years old) was far away from home at the time of his father's death. It is possible that repeated remarks made to friends years after his father's death—"If I had been there, he would have lived a year longer"—reflect a feeling of a missed opportunity brought about by this absence. Subsequently, the healer reportedly became terrified and threatened by the village in which his father died. Behind his fear apparently raged the conflicting emotions of attraction and aversion: "Part of him wanted to go to Amassine—but he couldn't. He was afraid of dying there like his father. He believed that if he went there he too would die." The impression that a sense of "unfinished business" was responsible for the terror resulting from his father's death is further strengthened by the fact that Wazana was generally a brave man, with a habit of taking risks his acquaintances regarded as an integral aspect of his personality.

Wazana and His Parents

While it is generally agreed that young Ya'aqov Wazana was away at the hour of his father's death, a less common version of the story claims that he did arrive in time for the funeral. According to the old couple from Assarag, Masoud and Tamu Tubul, angels came and took Wazana from his home and carried him to Tamzersht in time for the funeral. However, most accounts concur that Wazana was absent from his father's death, and stress his failure to attend the burial. This version is more congruous with the narrative logic of Rabbi Ya'aqov's life story, not merely because it is most common, but because it resonates with the strange acts that subsequently took place and which are remembered to this day by the healer's acquaintances and friends.

As early as 1959, Yosef Abutbul, a native of Tifnoute who heard many stories of Wazana from his parents, sent an account of these events to the Israel Folktale Archive. Here, apart from some minor stylistic adjustments to assist the tale's clarity and flow, is the account written by Abutbul:

He [Rabbi Avraham] had a son whose name was Ya'aqov. When Ya'aqov was old enough to understand he asked his mother where his father was buried. The name of his village—where he was born—was Assarag. His mother said to him: “Son, your father is buried in the town of Tamzersht.” He replied, “I must prostrate myself on his grave, I have to go there.” He took some people who loved him and loved his late father. They journeyed until they came to the town [Tamzersht] where they were received with open arms. He asked the townspeople ... to take him to the cemetery so that he might prostrate himself on his father's grave. They said to him, “we will go tomorrow Master.” He said, “I want [to go] now.” So they took him, and he took with him the Book of Psalms. They showed him, “This is your father's gravestone.” He said, “I want you to stand down there.” So they went down and he read Psalms. Suddenly the grave opened, and his father appeared to Ya'aqov just as he was [during his life]. He [Rabbi Avraham] said to his son, “Ya'aqov, Ya'aqov my son. You must go. I bequeath you your vocation for the rest of your life. Just go, Ya'aqov my son, May the Lord bless you and keep you.”

The story's opening implies that Ya'aqov was a very young child when his father died. The pain of premature bereavement and sense of agonizing loss, while not stated directly, are clear from the apparent compulsion to mourn at his father's grave (“I must...; I have to ...”), and the note of accompanying urgency (“I want [to go] now”). Rabbi Avraham's miraculous rise from the grave can be seen as some consolation for his

Chapter 5

son's absence at the time of his death and burial. The rather ornate written text has Rabbi Avraham pronouncing biblical-style greeting and blessings³ and bequeathing the profession of healing as compensation for his son's bereavement. Another legend sent by Abutbul to the Israel Folktale Archive confirms that this reference is indeed to healing. In this legend, Abutbul relates that Rabbi Avraham gave his son "his work, and then he [Ya'aqov] wrote [amulets] for everyone ... and God was with him in all that he did." The healing aspect aside, Rabbi Avraham's blessings to his son also emphasize the transience of the graveside encounter, and the finality of the separation (repetition of "You must go ... Just go").

Most informants provided a variation of the father and son encounter. They differ over the time lapse between the father's death and his son's appearance in Tamzersht. However, they all emphasize the severe anguish Ya'aqov suffered because of his absence at the crucial moment. For example, a kinsman noted that, "because he was away when the father died and did not see him ... he went mad." The majority ascribe Rabbi Ya'aqov a highly active role in the encounter with his father:

Ya'aqov Wazana was in Casablanca when his father died. He went to visit his grave and said, "I have to dig, to see my father's face." They said to him, "You must not do this! It is forbidden. You cannot bring him back." He dug all the same. When the grave was open they found bees on Rabbi Avraham's mouth, and honey pouring from his lips. The body was still intact, and the face was the same as the day he was buried. One of the Jews who accompanied Rabbi Ya'aqov wanted to take and eat some [of the honey]. Rabbi Ya'aqov said to him, "It is forbidden. Do not eat." The man ate a bit and became sick with the falling sickness so that he died, poor wretch!

The sense of non-acceptance of his father's death, giving rise to a powerful and irresistible urge for reunification with him, even for a brief moment, is given explicit and blatant expression here.

Whereas Wazana's connection to his father relates back to childhood (he was very young when his father died), the close bond with his mother, Esther, was experienced over a long period. Apart from a short period when he went to stay in Casablanca, Wazana lived at home with his mother until she died when he was in his forties. From the descriptions, it seems that Wazana was utterly devoted to his mother, a devotion magnified by the lack of other close relationships during most of the time he lived in Assarag. Wazana's friend and disciple, Rabbi Yitzhak Pe'hima, noted in the interview: "He was the only one, just him and his mother, there was nobody else. No father. Nothing. Just him and his mother." A distant relative said: "He lived with his mother in Assarag. He was

Wazana and His Parents

strongly tied to her and couldn't leave her." Masouda Buskila, a longtime resident of Assarag who is now married to Rabbi Ya'aqov's nephew, gave a firsthand account of Wazana's special behavior toward his mother: "There was no one compared to Rabbi Ya'aqov [in the way he treated her]. He would take her like this [mimed carrying someone], he did anything she asked, he hired a maid to clean for her all her life. He loved her very very much."

Later we will deal with Esther Wazana's attitude toward her son's unmarried state, but for the moment let us examine her death and its effect on Rabbi Ya'aqov's life. Again, there is a consensus among the informants that Wazana was absent from home at the time of his mother's death. There are varying opinions regarding the reason for his absence. Masoud Tubul, Rabbi Ya'aqov's neighbor in Assarag, recalls that Esther Wazana died when her son was away treating a renowned sheikh. He recalls going to look for Wazana, to break the bitter news, on the road to Tamzersht, and that when they met, Rabbi Ya'aqov already knew of his mother's death (although no one had told him), and had even informed the sheikh that it was imperative he return home. According to Masoud, the sheikh's efforts to change Wazana's mind included the offer of a handsome sum of money which was refused: determined to leave, the healer spurred on the mule borrowed from Masoud, and arrived home in time for the funeral. Another explanation for Rabbi Ya'aqov's absence appeared in the stories written by Yosef Abutbul. In contrast to Masoud's version, which stresses Wazana's loving devotion to his mother, Abutbul's account is hardly flattering. It appears below with a number of minor editing adjustments:

Usually he [Rabbi Ya'aqov] healed Arabs too and they paid him a lot of money.... The sheikh of Talouine had no children—just a son who was born when the sheikh was an old man. He [the boy] lay dying after being so sick for many months, his soul wished to depart.... He [Rabbi Ya'aqov] lived in the village of Assarag, and his mother was ill.

He [the sheikh] sent for him. They [the messengers] said to him [Wazana], "Peace be unto you, we are here on the orders of the sheikh of Talouine.... The sheikh [has commanded] you to come to our village; his son has been seized [by the demons], he is going to die." He [Wazana] said, "How can I go, when my mother is sick?" They said, "You must come. Your mother will not be afraid." He could not say anything; if he refused, they would throw him in jail ... so he went.

When they arrived there, the sheikh received him warmly. Wazana wrote something for the boy who opened his eyes and began to get well again. Wazana stayed with him for

Chapter 5

about ten days until he was better. When Wazana was there the sheikh brought him a *shohet* who prepared doves and all kinds of delicacies for him to eat. Then Wazana left and the sheikh gave him a lot of money. When he arrived home, he found his mother had died. When the seven days of mourning had ended, he summoned several demons—he was the only person in the house. He told the demons to bring his mother so that he could see her. They replied, “There is nothing left to bring you; only her head is left and part of the body and her hands.” He forced them to bring her so they brought his mother to him and he saw her.

The details of the drama unfolded in this story serve to dispel the perfect image of the devoted son. The plot is complex and emotionally charged: it arises out of a cruel dilemma with which the son fails to cope. Two non-typical responses—fear (of the sheikh’s reprisal for disobedience) and perhaps greed as well—cause him to desert his mother in her last hours. Moreover, in contrast to his initial refusal to accompany the sheikh’s men, it seems that he is pleased with the sheikh’s hospitality and is in no hurry to return home. The culinary delicacies he enjoys are indicative of his virtue: the informant is interested in emphasizing his concern with eating food that is kosher while at the Arab’s house. Nonetheless, the balance of virtue is heavily weighed against him: as he sits enjoying the lavish hospitality offered by the sheikh, his mother’s life draws to its close. Even if the reader understands Wazana’s initial predicament, his prolonged and pleasurable stay at Talouine can only be cause for wonder and serve to cast a heavy shadow on the image of the loving son that emerges from earlier noted descriptions.

As with the stories of the father’s death, here too the story ends with Wazana’s desperate attempt to see his mother. In both cases, the desire for reunification with his parents stems from the intolerable feeling of lost opportunity caused by his absence at the critical hour of their deaths. However, Abutbul’s story leads us to surmise that the torment of missing his mother’s death is magnified and mixed with a powerful sensation of guilt at the bitter knowledge that he could have, but did not, return home while she was alive. Demons, which did not appear at all in the story of the meeting with the father, are the ones who assist Wazana’s efforts to see his mother once again. This detail reminds us that he was no longer a young lad when his mother died, but a famous healer in his forties, whose primary power source resided in his relationships with the demonic world. This network had not been established at the time of his father’s death. Wazana’s mother, Esther, a good wife and virtuous woman praised highly by my informants, lacked the degree of piety possessed by her husband, Rabbi Avraham. This difference is reflected in the fact

Wazana and His Parents

that her remains were disintegrated and incomplete, whereas the father's corpse was perfectly intact.

The mother's disinterment appears in other accounts which, unlike the above, do not interfere with the picture of unadulterated love. The account below emphasizes the intolerable pain Wazana experienced when his mother died during his absence:

There was no limit to his devotion to his mother. When she died, the French had taken him to a place the same distance away as Eilat [Israeli port on the Gulf of Aqaba far from "mainland" Israeli centers], further. Then she died and they [the Jews of Assarag] waited for him. It was hard to contact him. There [in Morocco] they did not leave a dead person for three or four days. They buried them on the same day, you must do that according to the [Jewish] law.... He returned home three days later and said, "I must see her." [They replied] "It is forbidden," but he insisted, "I must see her; if I don't I will commit suicide." Why? Because he was so completely tied to his mother—more than a normal son. He was also her only son.... After the seven days of mourning he went along with the rabbi and took some men. He removed the earth and saw her, and then put the earth back. That same day he left the village. He was not able to live there by himself. So he moved to a place called Agouim.

As with the father's death, and perhaps even more pronounced, we witness here the sense of panic accompanying the powerful desire to see the deceased parent again in order to take a final leave. This is voiced here as a matter of life and death ("I must see her; if I don't I will commit suicide"). The act of uprooting and relocating to Agouim is explicitly ascribed to his mother's death. A similar rationalization for the move to Agouim was provided by another informant who described Rabbi Ya'aqov's anguish at his mother's death in these emotional terms:

Why did he leave Assarag for Agouim? There were no Jews there and no mother—his mother had died. He was very, very close to his mother and spent all his time with her. Without his mother around he had no reason to stay. He said, "Everything in this town is black in my eyes." We were told that when his mother died he went completely mad. He went to the cemetery, and slept there all night.... [Although] no one could be there, he spoke to *them* [the speaker pointed to the ground to indicate demons].... Who knows, who knows what he said to them, or what he did there. Maybe he spoke to them, maybe he tried to get her, perhaps. Who knows?

Chapter 5

Wazana's extreme reaction to his mother's death, and the powerful emotional tones, testify to his tremendous pain and inability to accept her loss. It is clear that he went through a profound depression at the time. A sample of the quotations presented earlier indicates the sensitivity of the informants to Wazana's unshakable, close relationship with his mother: "He was the only one, just him and his mother, there was nobody else. No father. Nothing. Just him and his mother"; "He lived with his mother in Assarag. He was strongly tied to her and couldn't leave her ..."; "He had no one else, no father, no nothing, just him and his mother..."; "He was utterly devoted to her, couldn't leave her ..."; "He did whatever she wanted, he really, really loved her." Wazana's stay in the cemetery represents a desperate effort to maintain contact both through physical proximity to her burial place, and by summoning his demon familiars, who lurk around cemeteries, so that he could see her again and bid farewell. After the encounter, nothing was left to keep him in Assarag.