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## Without Bounds

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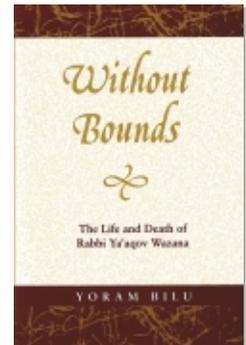
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# 7

## Amidst Sages and Demons: The Apprenticeship of Wazana



**W**hat turns a young man from a peripheral village in the High Atlas Mountains into a famous healer? Before we explore the course of Rabbi Ya'aqov's training, let us first reiterate that his impressive family credentials provided an excellent starting point for his career. In Jewish-Moroccan tradition, ancestral privilege (*zekhut avot*) signified a palpable expression of divine blessing and grace granted to deserving individuals, and as such, represented a crucial asset to any healer in the making. As a child, Wazana would have listened to legends of his ancestors' deeds in the Dra Valley and Ouarzazate, and experienced firsthand the deferential behavior of the Jews of the Western Atlas whenever his father visited their villages. This knowledge would have enhanced his feeling of strength and power in two ways. First, he had the backing and support of a line of saintly ancestors, and second, his family had admiration and respect of the Jews of Tifnoute. Wazana's boldness and self-confidence, as we shall discuss later, duly reflect this sense of empowerment.

Members of these Jewish communities believed that the "privileges" bequeathed by saintly forebears endowed their descendants with the power to treat the needy and suffering, heal the sick in mind or body, assist unmarried women in finding a spouse, render childless couples fertile, or return a man's lost property or his stolen beloved. It should be recalled that, for a broad segment of traditional Jewish society, including the communities of southern Morocco, healing was, to an extent, regarded as a skill related to religion, harnessing sanctity and its derivatives (e.g., holy names) to combat the powers of impurity threatening humankind.

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This proximity to holiness was more easily attainable in families with many venerated rabbis and sages. In such families, holy healing books were more easily accessible, and it was possible to meet experienced healers familiar with books containing the kind of “writing” used to bring relief from sickness and suffering. We have no way of knowing whether Wazana actually met any healers in Assarag. All we know is that his father, although not involved in “writing” himself, did own kabbalistic books containing holy names and healing formulae. One of Wazana’s friends from the village of Timjdtut described Wazana’s fascination with these books:

His father had a book so big and heavy he could not lift it. It contained holy names. I don’t know what it said. One day, when Ya’aqov was young, his father went out and the boy decided to open the book. He turned to the first page and read what was there. When his father, may he rest in peace, returned to find him reading, he asked: “What are you doing?” Ya’aqov replied, “I am reading this.” His father said, “Have you turned the page?” The boy replied, “No,” and his father answered, “You are fortunate.” He was afraid something might happen to Ya’aqov. From that first page he learned everything he knew. If he had turned the page, you never know what might have happened.

Later it will become clear that the claim that all Wazana’s knowledge was contained in that first page of the Jewish book of names is at variance with most renditions of the story of his apprenticeship. The story above however makes two important points: first, that the boy’s curiosity in the accessible book of names inspired his early interest in healing; second, we observe that the father responds to this interest in a tone of both concern and disapproval. This is underscored in another account of the incident: “Rabbi Avraham Wazana owned a book containing holy names which he would not allow his son to touch. Ya’aqov used to steal the book and look at it. When his father saw him reading, he tied his hands together and made him swear never to go near the book again. When he [Rabbi Avraham] saw [how far things had gone] he buried the book in the cemetery.” Rabbi Avraham’s stern stance is portrayed here as the natural consequence of a loving father’s fear that his son’s budding preoccupation with holy names might lead to serious harm. It was believed that laxity in matters of physical and behavioral purity and carelessness in copying and using holy names entailed tragic consequences. Furthermore, the soul that delved into the mysteries of the kabbala at too early an age was likely to be endangered.<sup>1</sup> No less danger lay in store from such impure forces as demons if a writer of names sought to attack and

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defeat them. The parents of other rabbi-healers from Morocco reportedly reacted to their sons' interest in healing in a similarly negative fashion (Bilu 1978: 458). Probably such attitudes dissuaded many a rabbi or sage from pursuing a healing career. Indeed, in both the case of Wazana and of present-day healers I interviewed, it is rare to find the model of an uninterrupted, entrusted transfer of the vocation from father to son. There is a distinct cultural emphasis on healing as part of an age-old family tradition; however, as in Wazana's case, there is greater weight placed on ancestral piety and scholarship rather than on writing-based healing arts.

We now know that Wazana ignored his father's outburst. Although henceforth he stayed away from the family book of names, he nevertheless relentlessly pursued his goal of becoming a healer. This is the first sign of those qualities of bravery and persistence that were to transform Ya'aqov Wazana into the idol of the Western Atlas Jews. Yet, without wishing to detract from his qualities, the likelihood is that the loss of his father at a young age effectively removed any potentially serious threat to his chosen career. With neither the guidance nor the strictures of an authority figure, Wazana was free to follow his leanings and curiosity, and give rein to everything that was bold and defiant in his nature. Interestingly, the fathers of most Moroccan healers I met in Israel died before their sons turned to healing. This finding supports the premise that lack of an inhibiting or controlling hand was an important factor on the path to becoming a healer. Beside this practical explanation, it is possible that a specific personality type, whose development was affected by the loss of a father figure during the formative years, is in fact attracted to healing in the first place. We may conjecture that an occupation offering the practitioner powers of this degree may well compensate for early feelings of frustration and helplessness brought on by the pangs of loss and bereavement. In the case of Wazana, this helps us to reconcile the apparent contradiction between the father's inhibiting influence during his lifetime, and the bestowal of the vocation of healing to his son after death.

After his father's death, Ya'aqov Wazana lost all interest in the books of Jewish healing. Without brothers, or guidance of any kind, and with only a tiny number of Jews in his village to restrain him, he felt free to enter the world of Muslim magic and healing. While it was not unusual in southern Morocco for a Jewish healer to acquire some skills from Muslim sources, Wazana took a giant leap by basing his techniques almost entirely on Muslim traditions of Arabic writing. In his quest for these tools, Wazana searched out the Arab magicians of Sous, an area in southwest Morocco known for its sorcerers and wonder workers. These magicians used to travel about the region, stopping every so often to display their arts in marketplaces along the way. They enthralled their audiences with such tricks as turning ropes into snakes, making food and drink appear by magic in an empty box, or by discovering the whereabouts

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of hidden treasure by writing on a pastry which then transported itself to the treasure's location.<sup>2</sup> Skeptics would describe these feats and others like them as deceit or sleight of hand, whereas the body of believers saw them as sorcery (*skhur*) or the work of demons (*jnun*).

A few healers now living in Israel recounted that they had personally made contact with Muslim magi in the Sous region, and had even invited them into their homes in order to learn their secrets. Such encounters served to augment the existing pool of healing resources with non-Jewish elements, including those based on sacred Muslim texts. Wazana's determination to gain a thorough mastery of Muslim lore led him to meet with sheikhs renowned for their skill in controlling demons. He also succeeded in obtaining certain of their books, although it is not clear how this was accomplished. In order to familiarize himself with these texts, he learned to read and write Arabic, and was one of the few Jews in the region to acquire these skills. Local Arabs, incensed that a Jewish healer had gained possession of Muslim works, tried to take them from him by stealth as well as force. Rabbi Ya'aqov, for his part, took great pains to guard his books, keeping the most precious of these close to his person under his *jellaba*.

Several informants related that "Rabbi Ya'aqov acquired his knowledge from an Arab sheikh he used to meet in a Muslim cemetery; they sat there all day and all night, studying." Rabbi Azar Gabai provided details of the way Wazana "became involved in such things." According to Gabai, when Rabbi Ya'aqov heard of a magician (*talb*) from Sous who could control demons, he went to his village and offered the magician a prized sack of sugar in exchange for his knowledge. The Arab ordered his wife to prepare tea for the young Jew who had come so far, and then asked her to bring in a jar of oil. Saying that Jews are careful about the cleanliness of their food, he asked Wazana to examine the jar to see if ants had crept inside. Wazana complied, but all he could see was his reflection in the oil. As he peered into the jar, the room vanished, "and he was under the ground, among the demons. He thought he was there for four years and that he had married and raised children." He returned to find himself still in the sorcerer's house. The sorcerer, who pretended not to know him, asked, "What are you doing here Jew?" Wazana, who had no recollection of the earlier events in the Arab's house, described his quest for the famous *talb*, and recounted the story of the time he spent under ground. The sorcerer finally disclosed himself and explained: "The pot of tea you left still stands on the stove, see, it has not yet been poured. This is the jar of oil that my wife brought to me, it is still here. I just wished for you to learn that the sugar you gave me was not wasted."<sup>3</sup>

With this impressive demonstration, Wazana chose to remain with the sorcerer for a further six months, studying his secret arts. As his apprenticeship drew to a close, his mentor made him swear to fulfill three sacrosanct conditions: "To keep himself clean, to say the Arab [Muslim]

prayers each morning, and to marry one of ‘them,’ i.e., to choose a woman from under the ground.” Here we learn the price for the long-coveted magical powers. The conditions of keeping clean appear straightforward enough; however, the two remaining stipulations offer a serious threat to Wazana’s Jewish identity. How could this member of a family of *tsaddiqim*, himself the bearer of the title “Rabbi,” possibly recite Muslim morning prayers as a routine? And what does it mean to “marry a woman from under the ground”—a she-demon? These questions will be addressed later, but for now it is evident that they point to the two worlds—Muslim and demonic—into which Wazana was swept in his undeterred pursuit of the magic of the Arab sages. The third of these conditions, and the story of Wazana’s sojourn in the depths of the earth, indicate that his ultimate goal was to control the demons. Before we explore how this was achieved, it is important to examine the nature of the demon (*jinn*, pl. *jnun*) and the place of this phenomenon in traditional Moroccan society.<sup>4</sup>

Demons are “spiritual” creatures with supernatural powers that allow them to travel great distances effortlessly and at great speed, to cause injury at the slightest touch, and to disclose anything hidden. Although invisible by nature, they may assume disguises, appearing as animals or even humans, at will. As with humans, they eat, drink, reproduce, fall sick, and die. In addition, demons are divided into the same divisions as humans, and their world mirrors traditional Moroccan society. Thus, their society contains both male and female, young and old, Jews, Muslims, and Christians, tribes, sovereigns, subjects, evildoers, the just, and even the saintly.

The parallel planes that the human and demonic worlds inhabit is reflected in the belief that each person “above the ground” has a demonic counterpart—a “twin” or “shadow” companion for life. The correspondence between these worlds is antithetical in terms of place and time. The demons inhabit the zone below ground (although they can appear above it—existing in water, fire, or air), and the night is their natural realm. Calling demons by name is extremely dangerous, and most believers therefore use euphemisms instead of referring to them directly: for example, “the invisible ones,” “the ones underground,” “the neighbors,” “the others,” “the outsiders,” or they point silently to the ground, to indicate where they reside. Demons can appear in the human sphere, and their presence can be experienced in different ways. Direct encounters between humans and demons usually occur once and briefly. However, on rare occasions they can establish long-term close relationships. There are stories of sexual relations and marriage between men and female demons, and of humans who either forcibly or by choice join the demonic realm for varying lengths of time. From Wazana’s training to the time of his death, there are clear intimations of his close affiliation with the demonic world.

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Demons are irascible, ruthless, and tyrannical, and their behavior is capricious and arbitrary. They are therefore extremely dangerous. Although they are not always evil or harmful, and only attack humans in response to an assault on themselves or their children, they make no allowances for the fact that their invisibility makes them vulnerable to accidental injury by humans. The most common type of demonic attack involves the sudden onset of disturbances to physical or mental health. Their assault can take one of two forms: either an external blow, or else the penetration and taking possession of the victim's body. Illnesses caused by the external assault are known in Moroccan Arabic as *tsira* (Bilu 1979), while those involving seizure and control of the victim's body, that is, possession,<sup>5</sup> are known as *aslai* (Bilu 1980).

A demonic attack is especially virulent at circumscribed times and places, near certain objects, when negative emotions are expressed, or during life-cycle transitions. Demons are attracted to heat, water, blood, meat, and certain kinds of dirt. As noted earlier, one is more likely to run into them at nighttime, and on certain days. They tend to lurk in cemeteries, marketplaces, water pools, caves, rock clefts, sewage systems, and slaughterhouses. Some live under the floor of the house, preferring the area near the threshold. Apart from these danger zones, which may be defined in terms of time and space, certain emotional conditions, especially gradations of fear and anger, are believed to aggravate the demons. Similarly, life-cycle transitions and changes can provoke demonic onslaught. For example, pregnant women are vulnerable, the risk of attack rising at the time of birth and immediately afterward. Newborn babies are also vulnerable, particularly boys prior to circumcision. A bride and groom are also at risk, and the interval between death and burial is extremely dangerous for the family of the deceased.

In traditional Morocco there developed an intricate system of prohibitions, customs, and rituals for staving off demonic mischief. Muslims and Jews alike tried to control their anger near meat, blood, dirt, and other matter attractive to demons; they were careful not to pour hot water outside the house for fear of harming demons; they were careful about setting foot outside the house unnecessarily at night, and tried to steer clear of areas purportedly haunted by demons. To appease demons, they placed food that demons relish in the corners of their rooms, particularly next to the threshold, and tried not to leave their own food and drink lying around in open vessels for fear that demons might partake and defile the remaining food.

There were rituals and traditions revolving around birth, marriage, and burial aimed at thwarting demons, and keeping them away by fair means or foul. Specific substances and objects were utilized to these ends. Thus, for example, salt, iron, silver, and tar were used to keep demons at bay, while henna, sugar, oil, and other edibles were presented

as peace offerings. Particularly effective in the war against the demons were names, sentences, and formulations believed to possess religious sanctity. In the Jewish context, most writing used against demons was based on kabbalistic “holy names” copied from ancient books similar to that owned by Rabbi Avraham. The Muslims too had their own formulae and invocations drawn from their own religious texts, and it was into these that Rabbi Ya’aqov delved. Although demons were considered dangerous and harmful, the means deployed against them offered a counter-balance to their threat and provided relief for the suffering they caused. Moreover, through a range of not entirely risk-free techniques, demons could be harnessed to human service and set to work healing, amassing wealth, reclaiming lost objects and stolen goods, or defending folk against sorcerers. It was his powerful desire to achieve such control that sent Wazana in search of the Arab magician from Sous. In sum, within traditional Moroccan society, demons were central to people’s lives. For anyone born into that cultural climate they were real, a basic given in daily life.

Rabbi Ya’aqov Wazana was by no means exceptional in seeking to harness the demons to his will. Many Jewish and Muslim healers pursued an association with the demonic world, seeking to control its inhabitants in order to alleviate the misery and suffering they caused, and also to exploit their constructive powers for healing and divination. The techniques used to gain control of demons have been described by Moroccan healers living in Israel (Bilu 1978: 469–76), and we gather that these are not much different from those Wazana learned from his Arab instructor.

A relatively simple operation was to light an oil lamp after the Sabbath, cover it with a *tasksut* (a utensil with seven holes used to prepare couscous). If accompanied by the appropriate invocations, a giant demon with seven heads (*afrit*) would appear, each of its heads growing through a hole in the vessel, and would submit itself to the will of the practitioner. The success of this technique was wholly dependent on the practitioner displaying complete self-control and iron-clad courage.

Other, more complex techniques called for a combination of methods carried out over a period of time, for example, burning incense (which the demons like very much) and immersing the body in the smoke (*bkbur*), writing “impure names” on a piece of parchment or paper, allowing the writing to dissolve in water, drinking the solution and then pronouncing invocations for summoning the demons. These ceremonies were performed at night (the demons’ daytime), over three successive months. A detailed account of the immersion in impurity technique used to achieve control of demons (inhabitants of the ungodly world), was described by a healer who, like Wazana, learned the secret arts from a Sous magi. The initiate was required to live in filth for seven days, bathe in urine, slay a cat and use its blood to write profane names on human bones,

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bathe in incense smoke and pronounce the invocations referred to above. To complete the task, the initiate stays in a known demon haunt such as a slaughterhouse or cemetery for a period of time. All techniques for gaining control of demons emphasize fearlessness. Those able to conquer their fear sufficiently will control the demons much as, in one informant's words, "a police officer captures a criminal in handcuffs."

Although we cannot know the method actually used by Rabbi Ya'aqov, his determination and courage obviously surpassed that of any of the Jewish Moroccan healers I met. The techniques they described were extremely perilous, and none of the healers, apart from one, had successfully completed the steps. Some provided highly dramatic descriptions of their attempts, but admitted that, at the moment of truth, they were gripped with such overwhelming terror at the prospect of seeing "the beings from the netherworld" that they retreated, abandoning the project. The only healer claiming to have completed all the tasks and being rewarded with a demon-slave confessed to losing it after a short while. Only Rabbi Ya'aqov endured all of the stipulations unflinchingly. His willingness to marry a she-woman is typical of his courage and the lengths to which he would go to achieve power.