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Without Bounds

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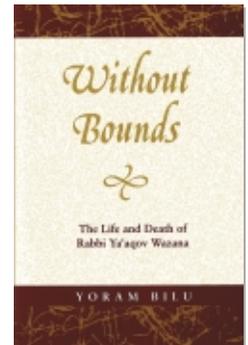
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A Question of Identity: Pray as a Muslim and Marry a Demon



“**T**o keep clean, to say Arab [Muslim] prayers each morning, and to marry one of ‘them’; that is, to choose a woman from under the ground.” As noted earlier, control of the demons was conditional upon meeting these demands, and Rabbi Ya’aqov’s firmness of mind to achieve control at any cost led him to abide by these obligations. It was this disposition that made him the singular and remarkable figure he was.

Invariably, Wazana’s acquaintances and friends raised the subject of his fastidious attention to dress. His garments were always white, though occasionally covered with a black cloak: his hat was a red, Muslim-style *tarboosh*. His clothes were of especially fine quality, and spotlessly clean—notwithstanding the many dusty miles he traveled from his mother’s home in Assarag. This meticulous attention to appearance was a sign neither of narcissism nor foppery, but, as discussed before, was the outward manifestation of his unfaltering dedication to the goal of demonic control through cleanliness. This, however, was trifling compared with the other two conditions he was required to meet.

It did not go unnoticed among Wazana’s acquaintances that he prayed “Arab and Jewish prayers,” though according to some, “he did not do this openly,” but “in secret.” The fact that this behavior was tolerated is astonishing, since it constituted an act of heresy that directly interfered with Wazana’s Jewish identity. Let us not forget that this rebel was himself a rabbi, the descendant of a respected line of sages and saints, and that his extraordinary behavior was neither short-lived nor haphazard, but deliberate, consistent, and routine (“he never began a day without reciting Arab prayers”).

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How can we explain this community's willingness to tolerate what clearly constituted distasteful misconduct? Beyond reflecting a certain tolerance and openness, we may infer from informants' attitudes that Wazana was perceived as unique and exceptional, and therefore beyond judgment by conventional standards: "There was no one like Wazana in all Morocco," was a frequently heard refrain. Ultimately, this relentless drive to assume the role of omnipotent healer led him on a strange and tortuous journey, which in the end benefited Jews and Muslims. "He had no choice," declared one informant resignedly, "if you wanted those things [healing powers] you needed to be both a Jew and an Arab."

Why did Wazana, of all people, choose this dangerous road? Because "he was born and raised among Arabs," explained his friend and student Rabbi Yitzhak Pehima. His intimacy with Arab life paved the way to his interest in Islamic customs: "He went to their mosques, learned from their scholars. He only used Arabic writing [for healing], he prayed according to the Arab custom. His occupation wasn't Jewish." Yet another of Wazana's students, Rabbi Shalom, claimed that Rabbi Ya'aqov "knew the Koran by heart—it gushed from him like a stream." He defensively excused his one-time teacher's perverse behavior by rationalizing that prayer cannot be evil—not even Muslim prayer—especially when it was harnessed to the purpose of healing. The same few people who denied the gravity of his actions took pains to justify this Muslim conduct. For example, Makhluḥ Ben-Hayim, Rabbi Ya'aqov's friend and benefactor from Agouim, recalled that Wazana categorically informed him that his seeming tendency to engage in Muslim practices was just his response to the fact that so many Arabs needed his services: "Why should I use our names when I write for them? Why should I let our holy names be defiled? It is for that reason I use their language."

Whatever his reasons might have been, one consequence of crossing the religious and cultural divide was that Wazana knew impeccable Arabic. He was one of only a handful in Agouim who read the language, and thus "whenever they [the Jews] had contracts in Arabic he was asked to come and explain it to them."

In fact, only a small number of informants actually saw Wazana praying like a Muslim. One individual from Timjdat, with whom Rabbi Ya'aqov had stayed, recalled his astonishment when one morning he went to his guest's room and found it empty, with Rabbi Ya'aqov nowhere to be found. Searching high and low, he finally spotted the healer, crouched in a field, bowing low over the furrows, in a posture of Muslim prayer. Usually, however, Wazana prayed early in the morning, locked in his room, and then went back to sleep. As we see later, these morning devotions followed in the wake of a night of activity, and so the exhausted healer never rose before nine or ten in the morning. On rising, he would slowly get ready

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for solitary prayer in the synagogue which, by that late hour, had been emptied of worshippers.

Apparently, the routine of “Arab prayer” followed by “Jewish prayer” had no ill effect on Wazana’s spirituality. His friends were amazed to see how long he spent in the synagogue each day, wrapped in his *talit* (prayer shawl) and *tefillin* (phylacteries), deep in concentration, “praying word by word by word,” clearly and emphatically. So celebrated was his devotion that people complimented one another by saying they prayed “just like Wazana.” The healer’s close friend, Rabbi Yitzhak Peḥima, stated that latterly, after the healer moved to Agouim, he discarded his Muslim practices, and only prayed in the Jewish fashion. Since no one else mentioned a change of this nature, this version most likely reflects Peḥima’s personal desire to see Wazana’s image conform to that of his ancestors.

Wazana’s reputation for prayer devotion, and his care, when among Muslims, to refuse food that was not kosher, are details introduced by the informants to reduce the significance of his pursuit of Muslim customs. As noted, Wazana’s friends regarded this aberration as an outgrowth of his occupation, which the consensus perceived not as “a Jewish occupation, but the occupation of famous sheikhs.” Thus, Muslim prayer was regarded as neither defiance nor heresy, but as one more element within a complex set of behaviors they understood to be emblematic of the healer’s desire to control the demons. In his friends’ eyes therefore, Wazana’s intimate relationship with the demonic world was the driving force that shaped his Muslim identity and gave it meaning.

Wazana’s acceptance of the third condition stipulated by his Muslim mentor, namely to marry “a woman from under the ground,” is by far the strongest evidence of the lengths to which he was prepared to go to gain control of the demons. In fact, such a marriage existed as a given option within traditional Moroccan cultural reality (Crapanzano 1980), although it was exceedingly rare for such a step to be taken voluntarily due to its dire implications. According to tradition, marriage to a she-demon condemned the human spouse to remaining single “above the ground,” with the threat of mortal vengeance hanging over any husband who dared to be unfaithful. It is hardly surprising therefore that human spouses were viewed as pitiable victims who had fallen prey to the wiles of lascivious she-demons. The latter supposedly used their cunning to trap men by appearing as the daughters of Eve and seducing them. Consummation with a she-demon sealed the relationship with a binding covenant of enforced loyalty—from which there was no way out.

Those skeptics who reject the reality of the demonic world will try to find a psychological explanation to account for the relationship between she-demons and reluctant spouses, and will hold some kind of emotional disturbance responsible for this strange form of commitment.

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The question arises: what kind of emotional constellation could possibly transform a relationship with a woman into a prospect so intimidating that an individual is compelled to seek refuge in the option of a “demonic” marriage? While such a path is both extreme and deviant, it does serve as a cultural option which, to some extent, allows individuals to avoid dealing with emotional inhibitions and their causes, and to escape the grave social penalty for failing to comply with the sanctified value of raising a family. Later on, we shall examine one possible psychological construction of Wazana’s demonic marriage, but for now, let us concentrate not on the healer’s psyche, but on the way he appeared to those around him. These were not the kind of people who deal in psychological currency.

Most of Wazana’s friends ascribe his remarkable healing accomplishments to his union with the she-demon. In their eyes, it was this relationship that granted the great healer the power to transcend the limits of possibility and perform feats undreamed of by normal humans. It is clear that the informants believed that, contrary to the usual pattern of a human male falling victim to a carnal she-demon, Wazana freely entered the demonic union as a means to achieving his ends. Rabbi Avraham Gabai explained this important distinction. First he described the more common instances, in which “one of their women grabs you and says: ‘You must marry me.’” Under these circumstances, the victim can only grovel before the she-demon and try and gain his release: “You must say to her: ‘I am not of your kind and you are not of mine; it is no good for us to marry. I beg you, please! I cannot do this thing.’” The submissive tone used is meant to demonstrate the sheer terror of a man faced with the prospect of a demonic marriage for, as we know, “he cannot marry above the ground unless she sets him free.” If the man severs the union to take a human spouse “they slay him where he stands.” In the second category, the active party is the man who exploits such a union to gain control over the demons. Rabbi Ya’aqov obviously belongs in this group: “He went looking for them, he found them, and he took control of them.” Even though informants showed no interest in analyzing Wazana’s behavior, they nevertheless expressed a sense that his “free choice” was in fact not so “free.” They tended to focus on external explanations rather than internal, psychological factors, and substituted the psychological drive with a permanent contractual commitment. “It is a covenant, he cannot cheat on her,” reasoned one informant, his friend clarifying, “He had no choice in the matter, it was signed and sealed, like with a judge, he had to accept it.” Their conclusion implies that Wazana, who chose a demonic spouse of his own volition and for his own reasons, was ultimately forced to stay with the she-demon, and could not free himself. One informant described this process clearly. It began, she believed, as a seduction, and ended with Wazana’s total capitulation and subjugation. “He was forced to marry, he was trapped by a woman [the she-demon]. She said to him:

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'If you want to enjoy life—then marry me.' Wazana agreed. You never come back because you have to return things [favors received from the she-demon]. Because he could not return her favors she had him [he could not escape]." The tension between free choice and forcible subjugation, between initiated union and passive entrapment, is noted in Rabbi Aaron Gabai's succinct description, which captures the two types of demonic marriages: "He ruled them, and they also ruled him. They worked for him until they took him. All his power came from them."

An unusual account of Wazana's marriage with the she-demon was provided by Rabbi Ya'aqov's blind cousin and namesake. He situates the story in Casablanca, during the time in Wazana's life when he was renowned as a healer, and not at the time of his training.

Why didn't he get married? He performed a *tkaf* [lit. "binding," designates sorcery designed to prevent or put a halt to something] on a woman from Dar el Beida [Casablanca]. He made it so she could never get married. There was some criminal type there who asked Rabbi Ya'aqov to write for him so that the woman would never marry the man she loved. Rabbi Ya'aqov slept alone, and when he got up in the morning he couldn't see. He hired a boy and told him to go to his mother's village [Assarag] and fetch one of his books. About a month later the boy returned with the book. He [Wazana] took different colored candles and said to the child: "I will read and you will light the candles. When I tell you to light the red candle, light the yellow one; when I tell you to light the green, light the red, etc." And so it went, until two in the morning. Suddenly, out of the depths of the sea sprang an *afrita* [giant she-demon]. She said to him: "You will never marry until both that woman and I are married." He began to beg her: "I will come to you for ever and raise you out of the sea, etc, only give me back my sight." She cured him and when his sight returned he fled from Dar el Beida.

How do the events in this somewhat cryptic story lead to Wazana's demonic marriage? Even though the answer is not explicit in the story, we detect an inner logic to the plot based on the "restitution" principle rooted within the traditional conception of disruption and restoration of cosmic balance. This principle governs the interactions between humans and demons. This particular informant, who continually made negative insinuations regarding his cousin from Assarag, accused Wazana (he often called him "Ya'aqov," omitting the respectful "Rabbi") of using sorcery to prevent a Casablanca woman from marrying her beloved. His criticism is further evidenced by his use of a Hebrew slang word for "criminal"

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to describe the Casablanca man who commissioned Wazana to perform the *tkaf*. For his involvement in black magic (which most healers deny practicing), Wazana was struck blind. To cure himself, he summoned the she-demon responsible for his blindness from the depths of the sea using an esoteric procedure that required lighting different colored candles in a certain sequence, and changing the names of the colors according to a certain code. On appearing, the she-demon announced that, besides losing his sight, the healer was condemned to remain unmarried until both demon and human *tkaf* victim were married.

It is not clear why the “restitution” principle involves the she-demon, unless the latter represents the demonic double of the human victim. As mentioned before, according to tradition, every human has a demonic “twin” whose life is identical in every detail. We may conjecture that by preventing the human woman from marrying, Wazana had also harmed her demonic double. Wazana’s words of appeasement, and his promise of an intimate and lasting liaison—“I will come to you for ever and raise you out of the sea”—may be interpreted as a proposal of marriage. He redresses the injustice suffered by the she-demon by marrying her. Although this act of restitution restores his eyesight, it nevertheless binds him to a demonic mate for life.

If the above reasoning is correct, the conclusion of this obscure story contains elements of poetic justice and even irony. To atone for the spell which indirectly prevented the she-demon from marrying, Wazana must surrender himself to her as a spouse. The price is high as he, just like the human victim of his own sorcery, is doomed never to marry on earth.

Wazana’s demonic union lasted a long time, during which he fathered two children (according to some, three, four, or even five children). Although only one informant claimed the privilege of actually seeing the demonic family, no one doubted its existence. There were even stories of Rabbi Ya’aqov introducing his beloved mother (who often bemoaned her only son’s unmarried state) to his demonic wife and offspring. One version of this story follows:

One day his mother said to him: “You must get married: you are all that I have, and I would like you to marry and have children that I may see before I die.” He answered, “If you swear to me that you will not tell anyone about me, I will show you my children.” She then made food without salt,¹ and prepared everything and cleaned his room. He then said to her: “When she arrives, don’t force her to eat; let her eat whatever she likes.” Then he brought her in, a woman with two children. Her [his mother’s] throat was going like this, up and down [from fear and excitement]. She came in with her children and ate and drank and kissed her [his mother].

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Ḥana Buskila (married to Rabbi Ya'aqov's nephew), heard the story of the meeting directly from Wazana's mother. According to Ḥana these meetings occurred routinely: "I asked her [Wazana's mother]: grandmother, why isn't Rabbi Ya'aqov married? She replied, 'Listen my dear, but don't breathe a word to anyone. It is forbidden! He already has children, and when I wish to see them, he brings them to me in the middle of the night. I see the children, and his wife. He can't get married [to a normal woman]. He already has children, and he brings them out like kings. I see them, and then, in a flash, he whisks them away.'"

A special relationship grew up between Rachel Ben-Ḥamo from Agouim and Rabbi Ya'aqov, who treated her for an assortment of problems and injuries—among them infertility that lasted for seven years. He also cured her of "evil spirit disease" (*aslai*). Her husband noted that his wife and the healer "were like two fingers on the same hand; as if he was her father or something. He used to say to people: 'Leave that woman alone, she's mine.'" Rachel added: "I helped him and did his laundry. He loved me like a daughter." No wonder then that of all the informants, only Rachel had been privileged to meet Wazana's demonic children. "He asked me: 'Do you want to see my children?' I was scared, but [all the same] I said 'Yes.' He went like this [she waved her hand]. He said, 'What do you want to drink, tea, coffee?' I said, 'Nothing, I am afraid.' He told me to cover my eyes, and then he said, 'Here is a boy, here is a girl.' I saw big children playing, three ... two girls and a boy." Even though only Rachel and Wazana's mother ever met his demonic family, everyone accepted it as fact: first, because no one could explain Wazana's supernatural abilities without them, and second, because they took his lifestyle, his daily routine, and particularly his nights, to be a token of demonic presence. Many stressed that wherever Wazana stayed, he was given a separate room so that he and his family could be reunited at night. Former hosts recall him speaking to his demonic kin all night long. "He stayed awake all night," marveled one friend, "he put out the light and, if you slept with him, he would sit up until after two o'clock, and when the cock crowed three times he slept."

Wazana's daily schedule reflected his dual existence. He spent his day sleeping, praying in the synagogue, sitting with friends and healing. As night fell however, his pattern changed as he stepped into the demonic world. A different facet of his identity dominated another part of the day: a Jew in daylight, at twilight, the border between day and night, a Muslim (since Muslim prayer summoned the demons), and with nightfall, the companion of demons.

In contrast to the surprisingly tolerant attitude of the ordinary Jews toward Wazana's multilayered identity, the stance of the clergy was one of suspicion and intermittent hostility. This is particularly evident from encounters reported between Wazana and the esteemed Rabbi Yosef Abu-

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Ḥatsera, both of whom worked in the region. Two informants, Rabbi Yitzḥak Peḥima and Rabbi Shalom Ben-Ḥamo, former ritual slaughterers and healers from Agouim, knew both men well. Peḥima, Wazana's pupil and friend, had been Rabbi Yosef's attendant, accompanying him on his travels through the region. The following incident, recounted by Peḥima, occurred at a time close to Rabbi Ya'aqov's death.

I was Rabbi Yosef Abu-Ḥatsera's attendant and went with him collecting donations in Agouim. We were walking down a road lined with trees when he said to me, "I want to sleep, you stand guard." I replied, "Go to sleep," and I massaged his feet to help him sleep. Wazana appeared and offered the Rabbi ten riyals saying, "Bless me." Rabbi Yosef blessed him and took his donation. When he woke up, the money was still in his hand, and he said to me, "Give this to someone who needs it, I will not take it from him." I asked him why, to which he replied, "It's none of your business—give it to a poor person, I won't have it in my pocket." I took the money and went back to the road and gave it to one of his [Wazana's] kinsmen.

The spurning of the donation speaks volumes about the extent of the great Abu-Ḥatsera's loathing for Wazana. Once, at a *hillula* in memory of Rabbi David u-Moshe, Rabbi Yosef vented his distaste before Rabbi Shalom and the other celebrants, calling the healer "impure," and ordering him to be seated far from his own table. Wazana took revenge with a typical display of magic, causing the meal to disappear, so that he had to be begged to restore it. The approving way this incident was reported indicates that Rabbi Abu-Ḥatsera's negative stance was not shared by all Jews in Agouim and the surrounding villages. The descriptions of Rabbi Yosef present him as patronizing and arrogant, revered and feared alike. As we see later, Wazana was a pleasant and cheerful character who warmly welcomed the villagers as his companions and friends. That Wazana was renowned as an omnipotent healer tempered the communities' squeamishness at his Muslim practices. At the same time, however, the reservations of the clerics, headed by Rabbi Abu-Ḥatsera, imply that Wazana would have had difficulty finding a place among those communities closer to the Jewish learning centers of Morocco. In other words, his behavior was tolerated precisely because of his whereabouts—among the small, sparsely populated, and scattered communities of the Moroccan Jewish periphery.