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Without Bounds

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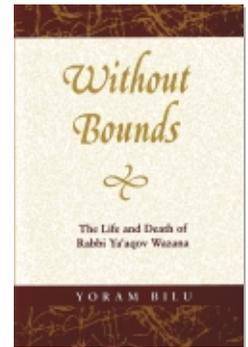
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“There Was Nobody like Rabbi Ya’aqov in the Whole World”



Wazana’s notably commanding appearance provided the perfect accompaniment to his amazing exploits. Informants describe him as tall, distinguished, powerful, and handsome, with dark, glossy, well-groomed hair, large piercing eyes, and skin aglow with life and vitality. With his powerful body and handsome appearance, he appeared so youthful that many thought him untouched by time: “Wazana kept his looks until his death: his figure and appearance didn’t change—he died in his prime, tall and strong. If you had seen him, you would think he was only twenty.”

His distinctive white clothes added further to his aura of grandeur. Wazana, as we know, wore white without fail, and his clothes were always pristine. His red *tarboosh*, which none of the other Jews wore, contrasted sharply with the white of his garments. It is not surprising that some compared Wazana’s appearance to that of a king. Hana Buskila, his relative, was very firm on this score: “Remember Mohammed el-Ḥamis [Mohammed V, father of King Ḥassan II]? Well, Wazana dressed just like that.” Wazana became a model for the local Jews due to his devotion to prayer and his appearance. To compliment someone’s appearance, they said: “You look like Wazana.”

Judging by the hyperbole, memories of Wazana have not been dimmed by time; the contrary appears true, time has only helped to inflate his already larger-than-life proportions. “You have never seen anything like Rabbi Ya’aqov,” declared one woman, “it was seeing the divine presence (*shekhina*), it was looking upon glory, it was a delight to look

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at him. His face was like Joseph in the Bible story, you couldn't look at him straight."¹ Someone else echoed this theme of a glory too beautiful to contemplate: "He was so virtuous, so dazzling, you couldn't look into his face owing to his *shekhina*. You had to go like this," and she mimed hiding her eyes.

Accompanying Wazana's statuesque build, good looks, and magnificent clothing were outstanding personal qualities. He is portrayed as friendly, sociable, even-tempered, and good-humored: "he was easy to get on with, you could joke around with him." Rabbi Shalom Ben-Hamo compared Wazana to his arch rival Rabbi Abu-Ḥatsera: "They were the same height, same breadth, they wore the same style of beard." The similarity ends there. In contrast to the condescending and haughty Rabbi Yosef, "Wazana was always *mabsut* [happy and content], always smiling. He was relaxed and not arrogant, always ready with a laugh, with women, children, Arabs, everybody!" Thus Wazana is presented as down-to-earth, sociable, a good companion, kindhearted, open, and devoid of all pride or haughtiness. The informants were particularly struck by his willingness to befriend everyone he met, without compromising his dignity in the least. "You could get close to him," concluded Rabbi Aaron Gabai, "he had a lot of love for people." One expression of this love was the great kindness he showed; whatever came his way, whether *zekhut avot* donations, or fees for healing and divination, he used to divide unselfishly among his friends.

Rabbi Ya'aqov enjoyed life, and regarded the companionship of friends, a bottle of *arak*, appetizing food, and a quantity of branded cigarettes as a priority. "At night, he sat with cigarettes, tobacco and *arak*, easy, easy, easy. No worries, sharing everything he had. He didn't like money, just a good time: to drink and be happy. Everybody loved him—small children and Arabs as well. On his travels, women would stare through their windows, calling to one another: 'Wazana's walking by.'" He put no effort into money or property, although this was clearly an available option. As someone said, "Money came easily, [but] he didn't want lots of money, he wasn't after money, he wasn't interested in a living." All the same, he never went without, his friends gladly providing all his worldly needs: "He had no property or business, but he always lived respectably.... Everywhere he went, they gave him what he needed." The informants sensed that Wazana's lifestyle was guided more by social impulses than by utilitarian considerations: "He loved laughter, friends, having a good time, these were his delight. If he wished for money he could have been richer than anyone; but what did he care?"

Rabbi Aaron Gabai listed Rabbi Ya'aqov's most conspicuous qualities: "He didn't fear anything, he didn't care about anything, and he didn't need anything." The first stresses Wazana's unusual degree of courage, a primary personality trait about which near unanimous agreement existed

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among the informants. The second concerns his almost total independence from social obligations and conventions—the lack of a family to worry about or property to protect. The third alludes to Wazana’s good life, his enjoyments, the way he exploited the pleasures of the moment, undisturbed by such mundane issues as income or family. Rabbi Gabai also referred to Rabbi Ya’aqov’s common touch and egalitarian manner: “There was nobody like Rabbi Ya’aqov anywhere. He had the appearance of a great rabbi, not a simple man; but he didn’t puff himself up or go around saying, ‘I’ve done this ... I’m going to do that.’ If you asked him, he would say, ‘I am a simple man, I’m like you, just kidding with people, I’m a harmless guy.’” Rabbi Ya’aqov’s highly regarded family, and his reputation as an omnipotent healer highlighted his lack of pretension and simple ways even more.

The miracles and spectacles Wazana produced for his friends also contributed to his popularity. Wazana was an epicurean who never compromised over quality tobacco, *arak*, food, or drink—even if supplies were rationed. If none were available, he would make them appear. This ability, which skeptics would dismiss as conjuring or sleight of hand, was, in the eyes of his friends, perfect proof of Wazana’s supremacy over the demons: “The ones from below—his wife and children—brought him things.” Such miracles, which many eye-witnesses reported, were inherently very different from the healing acts which appear later in this book, although the latter too involved demonic collaboration. In healing, Wazana demonstrated tremendous courage, determination, and persistence. His activities were often described in the dramatic language of matters of life and death. In contrast, Wazana used his powers socially in a lighthearted, frivolous way, to produce the kind of wonders that satisfy the taste buds.

Wazana’s love of liquor (“*Arak* was his life, but he never got drunk, Heaven forbid!”), and its important role in his social life, explains why most of his feats involve *arak*. It is said that whenever he ran out of drink, he would take an empty bottle, fill it with money and cover it with a cloth. Then, with a flourish, he uncovered the bottle to reveal it brimming with *arak*. Likewise, he would replenish his friends’ cigarettes, tea, mint sprigs, food, and drink. He had the habit of plucking cigarettes—“*Casa Sport*, the best in Morocco”—from the folds of his friends’ clothes, who would then swear they had no cigarettes on them. If he felt like tea he would rap the wall and a steaming teapot, with enough cups for everyone, would appear. If he felt like mint for his tea, “he would read something,” and a sprig of mint would sail down from the ceiling or pop up in a corner of the room. By rubbing his hands together, snuff or amber would appear from nowhere.

Informants recall Wazana’s developed sense of fair play: how he never took anyone’s cigarettes or drink without compensating them.

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When a “victim” discovered the loss of some article, the correct money would always be there in compensation. On the other hand, he had no qualms about punishing anyone who refused his demands. Stories abound of how he made *arak* disappear from the larder of tightfisted friends or neighbors who claimed their *arak* jars were empty. When someone protested their loss, Wazana would give his usual hearty laugh and shrug innocently, “But I thought you didn’t have any.” On a particular occasion Wazana taught one informant’s wife a harsh lesson for refusing to give him the last of the *arak* in her house:

He went to my wife, she was weaving a carpet at home. He said, “I want some *arak*, look for some.” She answered, “There isn’t any.” He saw that she didn’t want to give him the *arak* so he went like this to her eyes [passed his hand over her eyes], then he left her. She couldn’t see any more after that. Her eyes became so swollen and red and running with tears that she couldn’t move or work. My mother went to her. “What happened to you?” she asked. “I can’t see anything,” my wife answered. My mother knows Wazana. My mother went to him, “Rabbi Ya’aqov, aren’t you ashamed to do [that] to my daughter-in-law?” He replied laughing, “I didn’t do anything.” He didn’t care about anything. Then he went to my wife and said, “Now have you got any *arak*? Just bring out what there is.” She brought out what she had—half a glass. He did this with his hands again and her eyes were all right again. When I saw him, he told me what had happened. I said to him, “Is that what you did to her?” and he laughed and laughed. He loved to laugh.

This story demonstrates Wazana’s low tolerance for defiance. It also demonstrates that despite his quick temper, he was easily appeased. The informant’s memory of Wazana’s amusement reflects this too. By all appearances he gained more satisfaction from playing tricks than he did from safeguarding his dignity. In this story, as in many such incidents reported, Wazana maximized his entertainment by playing the wide-eyed innocent, denying any part in the disappearance of food, drink, or whatever, and publicly exposing the lie behind the refusal to deliver some coveted item. Wazana’s style, which added to the merriment and frivolity of social gatherings at which he was the star, only served to increase his popularity.

The clowning and fun aspect of Wazana’s wonders did not detract one bit from the awe and respect informants felt toward him. Unlike the suspicious among us, Wazana’s acquaintances never believed that these acts involved sleight of hand or amateur magic. It was unanimously held

that demons lay behind his unlimited powers, regardless of the fact that these powers were revealed through seemingly trivial entertainment rather than serious matters. There are manifestations of the demons' presence in other stories. For example, the story of how Wazana once sent his demonic servants to discipline some friends who refused to bring him *arak* from a neighboring village in the middle of the night. The men were severely battered all night, and were forced the next morning to complete their assignment. On another occasion, he assigned demons disguised as horses, goats, and dogs to disturb some sleeping friends, simply to enjoy their consternation.

The unmediated and hearty, somewhat childish nature of his tricks is illustrated in the following story: When staying in the village of Tidili, Wazana sent Rabbi Aaron Gabai, then a young boy, to go and buy *arak* from one of the Jews. The hour being late, he provided the lad with a large lamp to help him on his way. As he reached the vendor's house, two horses went careening past him. Startled, the youth shrank against the wall, but the larger of the horses hit him. The lamp was smashed by the impact and Gabai stood, shaking like a leaf, still clutching the handle in his grasp. The *arak* vendor had no trouble recognizing the source of the mishap. "Who sent you? Wazana? So then Wazana did this to you!" Wazana himself hooted with laughter when he heard the tale, and totally disarmed the boy. "How he laughed. He said to me, 'Look how late you are, and I'm still here waiting for my *arak*.' I replied, 'You nearly killed me.' Then he laughed and laughed and laughed: 'What did I do to you?' I told him, 'You sent the big horse against me, why didn't you send the smaller horse—it would have hurt me less!' Then he laughed, 'Nothing happened to you, so what do you care? It broke the lamp? I will pay for it.' Then we took the *arak*, and drank and laughed. He never did anything to really hurt anyone, ever! He just liked you to know he was a specialist at that sort of thing."

If people who did not know him treated him with disdain, Wazana knew how to put them in their place briskly and effectively. One time he was buying tea in the marketplace when a Jewish peddler chastised the healer rudely for rolling the tea leaves between his fingers to test their quality. In a single motion, Wazana transformed the sacks of tea into bran. The wretched peddler wept over his loss, imploring Wazana to restore the tea. As usual, the kindhearted healer was appeased, but not before rebuking the peddler as follows: "Never talk like that again to people you don't know. You cannot know who is good and who isn't—only the Holy One Blessed Be He does, that is his to reckon."

The next story exemplifies the strength of the informants' belief in Wazana. It also shows that when Wazana's powers were questioned, retaliation could be excessive as well as dangerous—a fact belied by the

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jocular, almost innocent tone of the narrative style. A sense of menace and apprehension at Wazana's power emerges between the lines.

Avraham Ḥazan was from Assarag. He said to Wazana: "If you know how to do things show me." Wazana replied, "I warn you Avraham, if I do anything to you, you'll regret it for the rest of your life." Ḥazan replied, "What can you do? Will I fall down? Will I die?" Wazana said to him, "You have been warned! Now, go into that room, but first tell me, what are you, a man or a woman?" Ḥazan answered, "What d'you mean man or woman? I've got children, I've got it all." Wazana told him to go and look at himself. He went, took a look, saw he was a woman [physically]. The man came out different. He dropped to his knees, "Ya'aqov, I'm begging you, I'm pleading with you, I beg your pardon, forgive me." Wazana said, "Did I say anything to you? Did I hit you? Did I touch you? Did I give you a potion to drink? Did I throw something on you?" He said to him, "I beg your forgiveness, I was just kidding ... pardon me." Wazana said, "Go back in your room." He went into the room again and came out a man.

The story above lends emphasis to Wazana's magical powers and unique style. Whoever wields powers capable of manipulating a division as inherently antagonistic as male and female is unstoppable. Wazana's disingenuous and sarcastic response to Avraham's sex change contains a list of typical methods used by healers and conjurers. In doing this he stresses his own superiority over the others—their laborious methods are redundant. He can perform miracles with a mere wave of the hand.