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## Without Bounds

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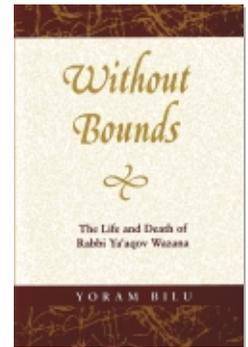
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## Wazana in Israel



**M**ore than a generation has passed since Wazana died. The period immediately after his death marked the onset of a massive wave of emigration from Morocco to Israel, which finally drew the curtain on Jewish life in the Atlas Mountains. Wazana's circle found a new reality, a very harsh one, awaiting them in their new home. Some fared better than others, but by now all are immersed in life in Israel of the present. Behind them, entombed in another place, in another time, Wazana is extremely remote from the here and now. Nonetheless, despite the expanse of time and space, Wazana's figure lives on with vivid intensity in the memories of many of his former acquaintances. They often hark back to him, in the *moshav* settlements or development towns where they now reside, disturbed by his unconventional personality, wistful at the loss of his healing powers. Some are sure that he continues to help them in times of troubles even today—a belief reinforced by the fact that he appears regularly in their dreams. At least three people commemorate the anniversary of his death with a festive meal (*se'udah*). It is doubtful whether this book would have seen the light of day if Wazana had less prominence in the current lives of the informants.

Some of his acquaintances ponder what would have happened if Wazana had lived to emigrate to Israel. A few like to dwell on the special position he could have enjoyed, drawing the obvious comparison with the Abu-Hatseras and their most popular scion in Israel: "If he lived in Israel, he would have been like the Baba Sali [Rabbi Yisrael Abu-Hatsera]." However, most prefer fantasizing about his marvelous powers and their usefulness. Time has in no way reduced these powers; on the contrary, they have been considerably magnified. His friends believe he would have been

able to cure any disease, including cancer. His powers of divination could have been harnessed to Israel's internal security needs, "if he had joined the police, or the security services, or the Department of Investigations," or alternatively to the foreign security services, where he could have helped eliminate the Arab threat. Interviewees referred to Wazana's power to transport people from place to place instantaneously, suggesting he could have seized Arafat and thus ended Palestinian terrorism. As we have seen, many insisted that all of Wazana's possessions and healing apparatus had disappeared after his death. Nevertheless, against such claims that "nothing of his was left," rumors abound that several of Wazana's books were somehow brought to Israel. The object of such rumors is the tiny clique of rabbi-healers intimately associated with Wazana in Morocco. These individuals, however, deny all knowledge of the books. Only two of them, Rabbi Yitzhak Peḥima and Rabbi Shalom Ben-Ḥamo, reluctantly and with great protestation, semi-acknowledged that they indeed had something once belonging to Wazana, but refused to divulge any more than that. Rabbi Yitzhak maintains that he does not use Wazana's book since "the writing is smudged" and illegible. Nevertheless, a patient of his reported that when seized by anxiety attacks following a grenade explosion at her *moshav* which claimed several lives, Rabbi Yitzhak offered her "Wazana's book" to sleep with at night. At first, Rabbi Shalom claimed that Wazana's book was held by another healer, Rabbi Moshe Tubul, of Ḥadera. He then asserted that "Peḥima had taken the books and copied from them day and night, and after that he was attacked, and became so scared he would not use it any more." Finally he confessed that he too had such a book: "I only use it in the worst cases [as a last resort], I never take it out; it is a holy book and I am afraid of it." According to his statement, he has the book concealed nearby in his old mother's house, buried under her clothes, to lower the risk of thieves breaking into his home to steal it. The benefits of owning Wazana's books are so obvious that we need to treat this point very cautiously.<sup>1</sup> However, even if we accept that some books reached Israel, it is clear from the admissions of those involved that they are hardly ever used, either out of concern for being injured or from lack of knowledge as to how to apply them.

Most informants claiming that Wazana helped them in Israel made no reference to his books since the nature of the late Rabbi Ya'aqov's intervention in their lives has been unmediated and instantaneous. Immediately after his death in Morocco, the prototype of his "afterlife assistance" was already in evidence: "He had a kinsman.... He always promised that his kinsman's wife would become pregnant, but the couple had no children before he died. Then Wazana died suddenly and there was no time to arrange this for them. So when he died he came to the woman in a dream and told her: 'Get up and take the plate in the corner, there is writing on

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it,' he instructed her what to do with it, and she had a baby boy she called Ya'aqov in his honor."

Wazana's apparitions in friends and acquaintances' dreams enables them to reap the benefit of his amazing powers even after death. It is thus hardly surprising that we heard of such dreams mostly from informants who had benefited considerably from Wazana's assistance in the past. For them, his regular nightly appearances offer some compensation for the void in their lives left by his sudden death. For example, during Wazana's life, Makhluḥ and Aisha Ben-Ḥayim, his hosts in Agouim, tended to seek his help whenever problems arose, in the same way Makhluḥ's parents had sought the blessing of Rabbi Ya'aqov's father Rabbi Avraham. Because the advent of their first children was predicated on Wazana's intervention, after the healer's death the Ben-Ḥayims' feared no more children would be born. However, Rabbi Ya'aqov's appearance in Aisha's dream dispelled this concern. According to Makhluḥ, Wazana appeared to his wife disguised as a snake,<sup>2</sup> which encircled her body three times, and asked her with each twist: "What are you afraid of? Maybe you have got a son you can name Ya'aqov." A boy, the last of the couple's children, was indeed born a year later, and naturally was named Ya'aqov. Several other young men in Israel also bear Rabbi Ya'aqov's name.

David and Rachel Ben-Hamo of *moshav* Atseret, and Masouda Buskila, Wazana's kinswoman from Be'er Sheva, all scrupulously celebrate Wazana's memory with a festive meal on his death anniversary. Their stories provide clear evidence that Wazana's place in their lives is no less after death than it was in life.

David first came to Wazana for help after a seven-year-long childless marriage, determined to divorce his wife should the healer's intervention



Shrine of Baba Sali in Netivot, Israel

prove unsuccessful. The marriage was saved when Wazana removed the spell (*tkaf*) producing barrenness in Rachel, David's wife. The child born as a result, Reuven, was portrayed as a short-tempered, nervy boy, because "he was born by force." According to Reuven's young wife, when Reuven was born Wazana held him in his arms, lifted him up, and announced to his mother, "This boy is half yours and half mine." The informant explained this declaration of paternity as reference to the fact that "he had no children of his own, only under the ground." Rabbi Ya'aqov then released Rachel from the clutches of an evil spirit illness (*aslai*) that had affected her on and off throughout her marriage. In light of this, it is hardly surprising that a powerful bond formed between the young woman and the celebrated healer: "They were like two fingers on the same hand," said Rachel's daughter-in-law; Rachel rejoining, "I helped him and did his laundry; he loved me like a daughter. He always reassured me by saying, 'Don't worry, I will guard you and your children, nothing bad will ever happen to you.' If I went to the stream, for example, to wash clothes, he would throw me apples or tangerines."

When Rabbi Ya'aqov died, Rachel began commemorating the anniversary of his death with a festive meal, first in Agouim, and later when she moved to Marrakech. Prior to the family's emigration to Israel in the early 1960s, Wazana appeared in Rachel's dream, beseeching her to continue celebrating his *hillula* in the new country. The couple indeed complied with this wish, and were quickly rewarded. They are convinced that Rabbi Ya'aqov saved both them and their children from all kinds of difficult and strange situations. In particular, they highlight the way Wazana helped Reuven, the son born as a result of his intervention. One night during Reuven's army service as a driver, he was involved in a serious accident on the road to Be'er Sheva. That same night, Rabbi Ya'aqov appeared, lamp in hand, in Rachel's dream and called out her name. Aghast, the woman screamed, "But Wazana, you are dead!" The healer ignored this, and informed her that he had just saved her son from a fatal accident. He ordered her to purchase a candle similar to the one in his hand and to donate it to the synagogue in gratitude to him for saving her son's life. At precisely that time, Reuven was struggling to free himself from the twisted car wreckage. Moments earlier, as the wheel went out of control he had screamed Rabbi Ya'aqov's name, and seen the healer appear before his eyes. On arriving at the scene, the police were amazed to discover Reuven, alive and well, waiting near the debris of his car.

Wazana continued keeping an eye on Reuven, "his child," even after his army service ended. When the young man's romance threatened to break up after the girl he loved became more interested in another man, Rabbi Ya'aqov appeared in her dream, informing her that she was under a spell commissioned by Reuven's rival. On learning this, the girl came to her senses and married Reuven. These visitations by Wazana in the guise of

savior at important crossroads in Reuven's life, starting with his birth, and ending in his marriage, have earned him the place of patron saint of the young man and his family. Indeed, Wazana is the family *tsaddiq* for all the Ben-Hamos, and all turn to him for help. "Whenever I have a problem—if the children are sick or things like that—I ask him to help me and he does instantly," said Reuven's mother, Rachel. Even the younger, Israeli-born generation, who never knew Rabbi Ya'aqov, enjoys his protection. For example, one of Rachel's daughters-in-law told the story of how her four-year-old daughter had been seriously injured in the head after tumbling from a great height and lay comatose for three months in the hospital. One Friday, she recalled, Rachel lit a candle for Wazana, and prayed to him for help. That night Wazana visited her in a dream, promising to restore her granddaughter to health. His promise was fulfilled, and the child recovered within a short time.

Children in the family are intimately familiar with Rabbi Ya'aqov. "We don't know Rabbi David u-Moshe," said one girl, "but Wazana?—someone who lives with you, who used to live with our parents. Sometimes we all gather for the festivals and you hear about him. It's a family experience. On the ninth of Av we hold a memorial service at home in his honor." Another girl added, "We truly believe. Our parents brought us up that way." Indeed, the name Wazana is regularly heard on the family's lips: "If you forget something, you must say 'Rabbi Ya'aqov Wazana' near the candles and whatever you lost will come to you.... We ask his help all the time." When Reuven fills in his lottery coupon he speaks the *tsaddiq's* name: "They taught us in the family, its just like with the Baba Sali."

The young people in the family grumble sometimes at being drafted to help in preparations for the *hillula*. Their groans are silenced, however, by their mother's timeworn rejoinder: "If not for him, you wouldn't be here [would not have been born]. How come we're here? Because of Wazana." The feeling among members of the family that their very existence is owed to Rabbi Ya'aqov makes him a basic and natural part in their lives.

Masouda Buskila is someone else who has Wazana to thank for her life. It will be recalled that Wazana fought grimly to restore her to life when the rest of the village gave her up for dead and began preparing her body for burial. A number of years after that incident, when Masouda was still a young woman, her leg became infected when a sharp splinter of wood pierced it and could not be removed. Wazana effortlessly removed the splinter, saving her limb from threatened amputation. When her infant son lay dying, once again it was Wazana who cured him. Given such a history, it is no wonder that Wazana's death failed to terminate his connection with Masouda. Masouda is more than grateful for all Wazana's efforts on her behalf and regards Rabbi Ya'aqov as a *tsaddiq*: "He raised me, he saved me, he is a *tsaddiq*, he saves me time and again.... I would have died

forty years ago if not for him.... Nobody is like Rabbi Ya'aqov. No one in the world, He gave me back my life!"

An ongoing dialogue exists between the two, the climactic of which are no less powerful than the story of Wazana saving Masouda's life back in Morocco. Wazana regularly appears in her dreams to offer advice and assistance: if necessary he chides her. When Masouda dedicated a Torah scroll in memory of a son who died while on military reserve duty, she needed to limit the scope of Rabbi Ya'aqov's feast, due to the high cost entailed in sponsoring the scroll. That year the couple arranged for a modest meal to be held in Wazana's honor at their local synagogue, and not, as was customary, in the comfort of their own home: "I baked just four *hlalot* [braided loaves], and roasted two chickens, there was a bottle of *arak*, four bottles of juice, a few apples and some bananas," listed Masouda candidly. However, it was not just the modesty of the meal, but the guests' behavior, that detracted from the festive atmosphere: "They didn't bother with grace before meals, simply didn't bother, they did this [she mimed snatching and gobbling food], they just grabbed whatever they could!" The following night Wazana visited Masouda. She was overjoyed: "Just yesterday, Rabbi Ya'aqov I made your feast." Wazana scowled at her, "You made me nothing!" Shocked, Masouda sought advice from a well known rabbi, who told her to make the meal at home in the future—never again in the synagogue.

Perhaps the tiny amount spent on the feast is a reflection of Masouda's repressed feelings of bitterness toward Rabbi Ya'aqov for failing to safeguard her son. An allusion to her trauma is evident from the forthright question she put to Wazana when he reappeared in another dream: "Rabbi Ya'aqov, why did you love Felix [the son Wazana saved in infancy], and not Rephael [the son who died while on military duty]?" Wazana's rejoinder, however, dispelled all her doubts: "Is that what you think? Were it not for my protection, that boy would have had no life at all." In other words, Rabbi Ya'aqov told her that he had lengthened the life of Rephael, who should have died at birth. Whatever the case, Masouda's manner of relating to Wazana testifies to the personal quality of the connection between them, and to the moral responsibility ascribed to him as the family saint ("family" in every sense of the word, since Masouda and Rabbi Ya'aqov were related). This responsibility reached its peak one Lag Ba'Omer night in the mid-1980s when, over forty years after he rescued her from the clutches of the burial party, Rabbi Ya'aqov again rescued Masouda from death.

One evening, Masouda's husband was at the local synagogue, attending a *billula* honoring Rabbi Shimon Bar-Yoḥai. Their youngest daughter and a grandchild were in the house, but they too left for the synagogue, leaving her all alone. At one in the morning Masouda experienced a revelation:

I went like this [she mimed astonishment], it was the *tsaddiq* coming. I saw him with my own eyes—Rabbi Ya’aqov. He told me: “If you don’t want to die, don’t answer the door. Don’t open it. Three people will come.” I saw him in a dream or maybe not in a dream, I don’t really know. He came and said to me: “Get out of bed,” so I got up. Soon somebody knocked at the door. Thieves—three men. I asked, “Who’s there?” He answered, “Your brother.” I said, “Reuven? Braham? David?” He said, “Your brother.” I said, “Look Reuven, I won’t open the door. I am nearly dead. When I saw the *tsaddiq*, my hands, my feet, my whole body went dead.” Then he said to me, “Open the door!” I said, “I won’t open it, go to David the neighbor, sleep there, I’m sick, I can’t even lift myself up.”

Then I said to myself, “How could I say to my brother I won’t open the door for him. How?” I got up and fell down—here [next to the door], again, I got up and fell down. Only my hand kept going to open it, but couldn’t feel it, I couldn’t open the door, there was no feeling. It still hurts me. So I was sitting by the door. There was a light. Then the thieves went away. They went into the religious people’s apartment downstairs, my neighbors. Then they called the police, and the thieves ran away. They escaped into the next neighborhood. They got into a poor old man’s house and killed him. Now they’re in jail, for the rest of their lives.

In Assarag Wazana saved Masouda from the burial party; in Be’er Sheva he saved her from herself as she tried desperately to reach her front door to open it for someone pretending to be her brother but who was in fact a dangerous thief. To save her, Rabbi Ya’aqov struck her to the ground, paralyzed. The dramatic struggle culminates with Masouda prostrate, shocked, and exhausted, at the doorway as the robbers, their plans thwarted, ran off and took another person’s life. The trauma scarred Masouda, “I was sick for maybe three months, I couldn’t speak, why, because I saw the *tsaddiq*. It was hard. Very hard, so hard.” However, this incident only intensified the bond between Masouda and Wazana. “Whenever something is about to happen to me, he comes to tell me. He must come. Rabbi Ya’aqov must tell me. He is my guardian.”

For Makhluḥ Ben-Ḥayim, Rachel Ben-Ḥamo, Masouda Buskila, and others like them, the healer continues to be very near; actively protecting them and their loved ones. Despite the fact that Wazana belongs to an increasingly distant era of their lives, his figure is nonetheless engraved in their minds, present in their memories, alive in their dreams. However, we should bear in mind that very few people carry these intensely vivid memories of him. As we know, even in Morocco, Wazana was a distinctly

local hero, his reputation hardly extending beyond the mountainous hinterlands of the south of the country. Within the Moroccan community in Israel too, Wazana's friends and admirers represent but a tiny minority. Even among the adherents of the Wazana family *tsaddiqim*, there are many who barely know of Rabbi Ya'aqov, who is in any case ranked far lower than figures such as Rabbi Avraham "the Great" or Rabbi David Wazana. We have seen that, generally speaking, the status of the Wazana family has deteriorated greatly in Israel, in stark contrast to the groundswell of adulation enveloping the Abu-Ḥatsera dynasty. When interviewed, the Wazana family insisted that in Morocco, "*ait* Wazana was the same as *ait* Abu-Ḥatsera, no difference," although they too are aware of the enormous discrepancy between the reputation of the two families in Israel. The main celebration honoring Rabbi Avraham "The Great," organized by his blind descendent, Shaul, in a hall in Natanya draws several hundred followers from all over the country. However, this event is dwarfed by the thronged *hillula* for Rabbi Yisrael Abu-Ḥatsera (Baba Sali) held in Netivot, and that of his brother, Rabbi Yitzḥak (Baba Ḥaki), in Ramle. Having said that, even the *hillula* in Natanya seems an impressive public event when compared with the modest family celebrations held in Rabbi Ya'aqov's name.

Each summer, toward the end of the month of Tammuz, the home in Atlit of Makhluḥ Ben-Ḥayim of Agouim, with whom Wazana spent the last part of his life, serves as the venue for a festive meal in the healer's honor. I attended such a feast and it was interesting to see that beside the family and their children, there were only seven guests including myself. Only two people, one formerly of Agouim, the other from the nearby village of Imini, had known Wazana in the old days. The ceremonial part of the evening preceding the meal was conducted by two rabbis—neither of whom knew the healer. In chorus, guests read portions of the mystical Book of the Zohar, the *kaddish* (mourning prayer) was declaimed in Wazana's memory, and the men said the evening prayers. Having completed the prayers, salads, alcoholic drinks, and soda were laid on the table, and a main course of beef, chicken, quiche, and rice was set before the guests. The meal was organized in two sittings: the guests ate their fill first, as the Ben-Ḥayim family, apart from Makhluḥ and a son-in-law, waited in an adjacent room, or busied themselves serving food. As the wine took effect, spirits rose and the level of laughter increased. However, I noted that Rabbi Ya'aqov, the sole reason for the feast in the first place, was conspicuously absent from the abundance of stories, learned discussions, and Torah tidbits that filled the air. Makhluḥ himself hardly spoke during the entire meal.

Less than two hours after their arrival the guests departed, the table was again set, and the family finally sat down to enjoy their meal. Makhluḥ's children, four sons and three daughters, all married,

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surrounded their elderly parents with their spouses and children. Wazana's presence was far more real during the second part of the evening. As noted, the birth of the Makhluvs' eldest son Yehuda came after Makhluf's previous seven children had died in infancy, following Rabbi Ya'aqov's intervention. Wazana had given Yehuda his blessing at birth, and the family believes that his spirit still abides with Yehuda. Sometimes, they say, he stuns them with his ability to predict the future and to locate missing objects. They are certain that Rabbi Ya'aqov endowed him with these powers in his blessing. As noted, the Makhluf's youngest son Ya'aqov was named after Wazana. According to Makhluf and Aisha, they both recovered from serious illnesses after asking Wazana to cure them in order to organize his feast in time. Indeed, Aisha's movements still bore the signs of the stroke from which she was slowly convalescing. "He came to see me in Carmel Hospital," she told me. "He said, 'Don't worry about anything,' and touched my body and my head [she indicated the places]. 'In two or three days you'll be back at home,' he said."

The meal in Atlit was the last time I participated in an event associated with my quest for material on Rabbi Ya'aqov. The picture that remained with me when I left the house truly captures Wazana's role of domestic *tsaddiq*. There was wrinkled, bearded Makhluf, beret on head, seated happy and proud in his armchair, his latest grandchild cradled in his arms. Surrounding him, the richness of his family—sons, daughters, sons-in-law, daughters-in-law, and their offspring. And the name of the baby he held so proudly—Ya'aqov of course!