



PROJECT MUSE®

Without Bounds

Yoram Bilu

Published by Wayne State University Press

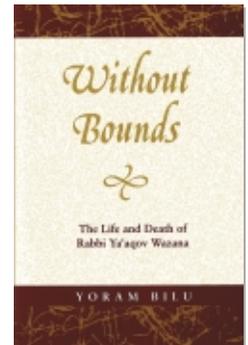
Bilu, Yoram.

Without Bounds: The Life and Death of Rabbi Ya'aqov Wazana.

Wayne State University Press, 2017.

Project MUSE., <a href="

<https://muse.jhu.edu/>.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/56561>

Access provided at 21 Jan 2020 03:13 GMT with no institutional affiliation



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

16

The Song of the Sirens: The Psychology of Wazana



The story of Rabbi Ya'aqov Wazana's life, through the eyes of the informants, illuminates a figure that even within the context of the traditional culture from which he sprang, appears highly anomalous. Can one reasonably expect to understand the psychological drives underlying Wazana's strange personality and peculiar lifestyle? Any answer seeking to assign Wazana some defined psychological typification will inevitably be fraught with problems. How can one possibly penetrate the psyche of a figure who is swathed in the mists of legends, and molded as much by the twists and turns of memory as by the reality of his life? However, while such questions obviously need to be addressed (and will be in the next chapter), the intriguing nature of Wazana's life makes it difficult to resist delving into the hidden recesses of his personality.

It is difficult to ignore Wazana's unique relationship with his parents as we search to understand what drove him and what lay behind his practically limitless healing powers? The roots of his attachment obviously stem from early childhood when, apart from a younger sister, he was the only child, all other siblings having died in infancy. His father's death at a young age, and the feelings of bereavement and helplessness generated by the sudden loss, were exacerbated when circumstances not only dictated his absence from his father's side at the hour of death, but kept him from both his father's funeral and burial as well. Naturally, Rabbi Ya'aqov's conviction that his father would have lived longer had he been there only aggravated his pain, perhaps even feeding the guilt sparked by his absence at this critical time. The sense that Rabbi Abraham's death left Wazana

The Psychology of Wazana

indelibly scarred is supported further by reports of his aversion toward Amassine, where his father died, and his steadfast refusal to set foot there. This apparent “phobia” appears even more significant in view of the courage and daring that generally characterized the healer.

The strongest expression of Wazana’s inconsolable loss is the strange story of unearthing his father’s grave. This story encapsulates the son’s incapacity to accept the father’s death, and his consequent desperate attempt to restore him to life. If this is indeed the wish behind this taboo act, it is presented through the narrative as an attainable goal, but though the unearthed body is miraculously complete and unravaged by time, Wazana’s goal is ultimately unfulfilled. His father is left lying in his grave and Wazana remains agonized by the separation, his yearning unalleviated. The first inclination that his anguish and longing for reunification might be translated into the power to heal (we deal with this point later) appears in the story of Wazana’s visit to the cemetery, when Rabbi Avraham, having awoken in his grave, grants his son the power to heal.

With his father’s death, and his sister’s marriage and departure from home, Wazana’s mother, Esther, is the only close person in his life. On the point of the deep connection between mother and son, the informants were very clear. Here however, let us just reiterate that Wazana, who never established a home with a human spouse, preferred living with his mother until her death in his forties. Even when she died, Wazana stayed completely bound to her memory and was painfully bereft, as evidenced by the poignant daily ritual with her robe. The ritual, which has been described by a close friend, seems so very personal and laden with sorrow and longing, that we are impressed with a sense of having witnessed a rare, unmediated glimpse into the healer’s inner world. At any rate, it is tempting to explain his long-term unmarried status as the result of a psychological inhibition arising from his incapacity to detach himself from his mother emotionally.

From the psychological point of view, it is interesting that the identical set of adverse circumstances that transformed the death of Wazana’s father into such a painful episode recurs in the story of the mother’s death three decades later, only this time with even greater impact. Again, informants report Wazana’s absence from home at the time of his mother’s death, and once again, their stories indicate a desperate longing for reunification after her death, and in short, a desire to restore her to life. Guilt associated with the death of a parent, which was more or less latent in the father’s story, appears here in explicit form, at least in some of the stories, according to which Wazana was away indulging himself in the sheikh’s home as his mother lay on her deathbed.

It seems that the stories of both deaths seek to emphasize the level of pain experienced by Wazana and his inability to accept the loss. His father’s cane and mother’s robe, the two concrete reminders of his parents

that Wazana always kept at his side, are far more than objects compensating for their absence. They actually symbolize his inability to free himself from his parents' memory.¹ The stories of opening the graves to reveal the corpses, which may denote his fantasy of restoring them to life, is the ultimate expression of this. Does the unremitting pattern he exhibits of "going all the way," gazing at what is forbidden, retrieving the irretrievable, hold the key to understanding Wazana's unique *modus operandi*?

Indeed, it was the very "visible" and public expression of his divination and healing techniques that marked Wazana's uniqueness as a healer. He raised demons from the depths of the earth—in contrast to the parents underground he could not raise—and these mysterious, elusive beings became his closest allies and family. In this sense he was set apart even within the "demonic culture" of traditional Morocco, where the prevailing attitude toward demons was avoidance whenever possible (within the constraints dictated by the cultural perceptions of the behavior of the demonic world). Note that demons in Morocco were known as "the invisible," and people avoided uttering their name explicitly for fear of incurring their wrath.² Wazana's penchant for exposing that which is best left unseen and unexplored can also be seen in his actions against sorcerers. Of all the healers, only he dares to identify them, only he delivers the harmful materials they have concocted from Muslim graves where they are buried, to be destroyed.

This leads us, perhaps, closer to the psychological drives underpinning Rabbi Ya'aqov's healing powers. His extraordinary style, with its characteristic audacity, indefatigability, and firmness of mind, and his uncompromising pursuit of his objectives, was perhaps an outgrowth of his painfully hopeless effort "to heal" first his dead father, and then his dead mother, and bring them once more to life. These personal qualities enabled him to treat *almost* every kind of affliction, with complete disregard for the surrounding circumstances. In this sense it is highly significant that Wazana's rare failures involved patients who were fated to die. Apart from the remarkable case of his kinswoman Masouda Buskila, whom he delivers from the clutches of the grave diggers, the stories of his failures repeatedly indicate that even the greatest healer of them all was not omnipotent. Even he lacks the power to bridge the great divide separating the living from the dead. Translated into the language of yearning and desire, one might say that the ambition underlying his desire to heal—the fantasy of reviving his parents—was beyond Wazana's reach.

Considered against this background, the healing of the sheikh's daughter represents the dramatic climax of Wazana's life narrative. In this story he defies the demons, transgressing the only restriction imposed on his healing activities, and brings a condemned patient back to life. Thus, Wazana retroactively fulfills his lifelong ambition, and finally attains symbolic compensation for his beloved parents' deaths. His triumph is

The Psychology of Wazana

short-lived, however, as he forfeits his own life by restoring that of the sheikh's daughter. Besides the important matter of redressing the balance between the worlds that his death entails (see next chapter), there is also the sense that his life force begins to ebb the moment he fulfills his life-long goal of compensating for his parents' death by restoring another human life.

Any psychological analysis of Wazana is incomplete without reference to his relationship with the demonic world. This, however, is not the place to discuss in any depth the significance of demons in traditional Moroccan society, since in this society the demonic world was regarded as a very real and primary aspect of everyday life. If we accept the premise that demons and sorcerers, as well as saints, as culturally constituted, could provide a mechanism that allowed individuals to mold and articulate their inchoate emotional experiences, then it would certainly be appropriate to question how these elements functioned in Wazana's life. What needs and desires was Wazana able to satisfy through his association with the demonic world?

A relatively straightforward answer would emphasize the power that domination of the demons was capable of bestowing. By their choice of healing as an occupation, people attracted to this vocation, whatever their personal motives, demonstrate a distinct need for power and control, since they naturally become the focus of great dependency on the part of those requiring their services. What is the origin of the powerful urge for control that drives certain people to train as healers? And could it be that a healing career offers compensation for some privation or loss during childhood? In Wazana's case, the premature loss of his father and the painful circumstances surrounding that event again come to the fore. The fact that it was his father who bequeathed him this pursuit immediately after his death, when Wazana first visited his grave, increases the likelihood that the choice of healing as a career was some sort of compensation for being deprived of his parent. It is worth reiterating that the association between the loss of a parent and the healing vocation is not unique to Wazana. Most of the Moroccan healers I found in Israel also lost their fathers at an early age.

Thus Wazana's excessive intimacy with the demonic world offered him a means of controlling his world and subordinating it to his will. If he indeed sought to compensate for the loss of his parents through the powers of his demonic servants, as argued above, then it is particularly significant that those powers resided in beings who, like his dead parents, were under the ground, but who, unlike his parents, he did have the power to bring to the surface. The correlation between recurring loss, especially of parents, and mystical experience involving the apparition of supernatural beings with whom a compensatory relationship is established, has been dealt with extensively in contemporary psychology literature.³

Within the spectrum of Wazana's diverse interactions with the demonic world, the most arresting is his marriage to a she-demon. It is tempting to regard this strange relationship, which was uncommon even by Moroccan standards, let alone among rabbi-healers, as connected to the explanation above regarding Wazana's single status "above the ground." On the one hand, he was incapable of detaching himself emotionally from his mother and of forming a relationship with another woman; on the other, he was subject to pressure, mainly from his mother, to settle down and raise children. His ineffectuality in coping with these conflicting pressures may have led him to choose the demonic option, an option that looks to be "imaginary" from the extra-cultural perspective, but which is nevertheless a viable, though perhaps marginal and unusual, alternative in intra-cultural terms. The psychological profile of Muslim men of the Moroccan Ḥamadsha sect, who are supposedly coerced into marriage by she-demons, has been extensively documented by anthropologist Vincent Crapanzano (1973, 1980). Crapanzano explains that the choice of a demonic spouse, and the incumbent unmarried status in the human world, denotes a response to a failure to live up to the typical male role required in traditional Moroccan society. Marriage to a she-demon therefore provides an acceptable cultural outlet for men who cannot establish normal relationships with women due to deep-seated feelings of inadequacy and weakness, nourished perhaps by latent homosexual tendencies.

Of course, we will never know the truth behind Wazana's attachment to his mother. Nevertheless, it is relevant to note the difference between Wazana and the sect Crapanzano studied. Crapanzano's study took in a specific group of socially inferior Muslim males who exist in a state of miserable poverty on the margins of Moroccan society. In stark contrast to the Ḥamadsha's personal and social plight, Rabbi Ya'aqov Wazana was perceived by his peers as a courageous and respected individual. There are abundant stories showing him radiating power, control, and self-confidence in his work and emphasizing a behavior style that is outstanding in its boldness. Even if Wazana and the Ḥamadsha share similar emotional conflicts, Wazana's strategy for coping was more effective than theirs and shows plain evidence of compensation, or even over-compensation. Thus, Wazana's healing exploits and extraordinary lifestyle may be regarded as a vehicle used to convert his handicaps and weaknesses into reservoirs of energy and strength.

With respect to the demonic factor, Wazana and the Ḥamadsha sect differ in so far as the Ḥamadsha present themselves as victims forced into marriage after falling prey to the seductive powers of the she-demons. Wazana in contrast is portrayed by informants as actively, and of his own initiative, seeking the union with a she-demon. Readers unfamiliar with traditional Moroccan society will regard either behavior as denoting emotional disturbance. However, from a culture-sensitive standpoint we

The Psychology of Wazana

cannot but be impressed by Wazana's talent for exploiting the demonic relationship as a legitimate idiom for articulating his emotional distress and inner conflict. Similarly, his creativity in establishing a surrogate family—complete with demonic offspring—as an alternative to that he lost and the human family he failed to raise, can only be cause for admiration. Thus Wazana created for himself a unique and highly remarkable lifestyle that was culturally acceptable, and in many respects meritorious, despite its marginality (cf. Obeyesekere, 1981, 1990).

In this chapter we have attempted to present one interpretation of the riddle of Wazana's life, based on his yearning for his father, whom he lost at an early age, and his close attachment to his mother, which drove him to a union with a she-demon rather than a human spouse. We can perhaps see in the incident that immediately caused his death—his failure to keep silent and ignore the voice calling him on the bend in the road near the cemetery in Agouim—a significant life juncture, the confluence of all of the driving forces and desires that shaped and influenced his personality and behavior. His reckless response to the demonic voice demonstrates his undeviating loyalty to that unreserved, bold attitude that characterized all his actions, an unfettered gesture even in the face of an explicit prohibition. Just as Wazana never balked at entering the dark realms of the demonic and the magical, and unearthed and examined that which he should have left hidden, here too he responds to the challenge flung down by the demonic call, fully aware of the risk to his own life. On the other hand, if we remember that by saving a person condemned to die, Wazana had effectively accomplished his lifelong ambition, then the possibility should be considered that his response to the voice attests to resignation and acceptance on his part—a mortal weariness after interminable years of sorrow and pining after his parents. It is almost as if the voice of his demon brethren, crying out his name from the depths of the earth, is the very voice of his yearning for his parents who, just as the demons, reside in the dust of the cemetery. Thus for Wazana, the demonic summons may be seen as the song of the sirens, beckoning him to the nirvana he strived toward all his life, to unite with the beloved parents whose absence he could never accept.