Wazana’s death was abrupt and untimely. People from Agouim recall that before the fateful Friday when, at the age of fifty, his condition started deteriorating, “Wazana was the same as usual. There was nothing wrong with him; he gleamed like a mirror—so strong and healthy.” A minority version claims that several days before his death gray streaks appeared in his hair, and his eyesight dimmed slightly. Makhluf Ben-Hayim, Wazana’s benefactor in Agouim, blamed these changes on a ruling by the authorities that forced many Jews, including Wazana, to work on a strenuous road construction project. However, someone else claimed that Wazana himself made these early signs of aging appear, to gain a discharge from the backbreaking work.

Whatever the case, all agree that the sequence of events that led Wazana to his death began when he cured the daughter of a local sheikh, and defied a categorical prohibition of the demons. The sheikh’s daughter, a member of a prosperous and distinguished family, became mortally afflicted one day after she stumbled upon several snakes (which were actually demon progeny), on her way to the river, and smashed their heads. Furious at the death of their young, the demons counterattacked so viciously that the girl’s features became contorted, her head twisted around backwards, and she fell unconscious. According to accounts provided by other informants, the demons were not content with physical punishment, but penetrated her body and possessed her. Whether this was tsira (demonic assault) or aslai (demonic possession), the girl appeared mortally ill; she lay on her bed, “unable to speak or move—she was dried up [paralyzed].”
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Her family did not summon Wazana immediately. Accounts emphasize her father’s frantic efforts to find relief for her before, in despair, he finally turned to Rabbi Ya’aqov: “They took her to a doctor, they took her to an Arab, they took her to rabbis…. There was nowhere in the world they didn’t go—and nothing helped!” The girl’s family was dismayed at having to ask a Jewish healer for help even though Wazana had been recommended by Arabs who tried to treat her. In the end, however, having exhausted all their options, they reluctantly begged Rabbi Ya’aqov’s assistance. The size of Wazana’s fee depends on the scope and richness of each informant’s imagination: it ranged from a sheep or goat, to “two sheep, a mare and a suitcase filled with gold and silver”—it even reached as high as “three or four million rial.” Most likely, the size of the reward is an indication of the informant’s preconceived ideas regarding Wazana’s motives for defying the demons. Those who exaggerated the payment consider the reward itself the incentive (“the sheikh bribed him”), while those who downgraded his reward regarded Wazana’s courage, his tendency to take risks, and his coolness in the face of difficulty, as the motivating factors.

At any event, not a single informant claimed that the great healer went to his death ignorant or innocent of his action. The demons, whether members of Wazana’s demonic clan or otherwise, all cautioned him against healing the girl, and even tried sabotaging his efforts, overturning his inkstand as he prepared the amulet for her and wildly shaking his quill. Nevertheless, Rabbi Ya’aqov refused to surrender, and “forced himself” to continue until his work was done.

Informants phrased the demons’ admonitions in authoritative, urgent language which included explicit threats against Wazana’s life: according to an informant from Agouim, the demons warned him, “Go away, go away—if you treat her you will surely die.” Wazana’s kinswoman excitedly recalled the demons’ pleas: “It is forbidden! Take care, we come to this girl from heaven. She killed our children.” Another remembered, “They cautioned him: ‘Watch out, you are at the limit!’” Those who believed the girl’s affliction to be caused by aslai (possession), placed the demonic warnings within the victim’s body: “Beware Wazana! If you come to drive us away, you will not leave here alive.… Do not interfere with us…. You must do what we tell you!” In another version, “He [Wazana] said to them: ‘Leave her!’ and they answered: ‘We will not leave. Someone is going to die! Better this goyah [non-Jew] dies than you!’”

Apart from the obvious and recurrent explanation involving “restitution,” according to which the fate of the sheikh’s daughter (or the fate of whoever treated her) was sealed the moment she killed the demons’ offspring, there is another explanation, namely, that the sickness came not from “under the ground” but from “heaven.” It was the will of God, and the demons were merely fulfilling the role of executioners. “We have
descended through seven firmaments, we are from heaven,” declared the
demons, desperately trying to prevent Wazana from crossing the girl's
threshold. “Do not enter, Ya’aqov,” they cautioned, “if you do, you will
die in her place. We must take her because she slew our children.” But,
Wazana, as we know, was deaf to their warnings, and continued on his
fateful way across the threshold of the room.

Several people maintained that Rabbi Ya’aqov was forbidden to
interfere in this case since the demons the girl had killed belonged to a
special breed over which he had no control. One informant claimed that
Wazana was aware of such an eventuality and had considered its impli-
cations. Thus, the informant claimed, when asked to heal the sheikh’s
daughter he replied, “I will go to her; if she is sick because of the demonic
people I lived with, I will be able to heal her, if not, I cannot promise
anything.” When he crossed the threshold to the sickroom, the demon
inhabiting her body addressed him through her mouth: “Wazana, we are
not the same kind that you lived with. Know that if you enter, it is at your
own risk. Beware.”

Another informant couched the demons’ stance and warning in
political terms: “Let us suppose you are the United States, and you’ve got
seven hundred million [people]. They belong to you. We are the Soviet
Union and we don’t belong to you. We are not the people you rule over.
Beware of us. This girl killed one of our kind, we will avenge ourselves on
her. We must take her soul. If you choose to fight us, it will cost you
dearly.” The clear unequivocality of the demonic interdiction tells us that
even a healer of Rabbi Ya’aqov’s stature was not omnipotent: his activi-
ties were proscribed by certain constraints, few though they might be.
There were demonic legions outside his sphere of influence, and he was
not entitled to meddle in their affairs.

Wazana’s response to the demonic threats was confident, intransi-
gent, and presumptuous. He answered their final warning: “I will save
this girl—no matter the cost. If you do not leave her in a few seconds, I
will set fire to this cloth and burn the whole lot of you.”! When the
demons explained that “the girl’s sickness was from heaven,” and not
from under the ground, his insolent reply was, “Even if it comes from
higher still, I must save her, I am not afraid.” When the demons cautioned
him, saying, “You are not one of us, we are not your kin, you do not rule
us,” he ignored them, “continued writing” (preparing the amulet), and
drove the demon out of the sick girl’s body.

The repeated use of expressions denoting entry and exit, plus the
positioning of the confrontation between Wazana and the demons on the
threshold of the girl’s sickroom, seem natural to this event, the purpose
of which was to force out demons who had penetrated the human’s body,
in order to drive them away and send them back whence they came.
At the same time, these phrases focus attention on the quintessential
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problem in this particular case: transgressing boundaries and invading unauthorized territory.

The moment the demon (or demons) were exorcised from the girl’s body, her recovery came swift and complete, to the extent that Rabbi Yithak Pehima reported catching sight of her that very evening returning from the river in the company of the village girls, a large jar on her shoulder. According to versions which designated the girl’s sickness as tsira (external demonic attack), as opposed to possession, she needed to place the amulet Wazana had prepared in the Arab cemetery, next to a Muslim grave. Having done this, she was miraculously cured.

Healing the sheikh’s daughter is therefore the most impressive evidence of Wazana’s healing powers: he restores life to a mortally sick and doomed individual. However, even Wazana could not remain wholly unruffled by the demons’ threats. Hana Buskila, a young girl already married to his nephew at the time of Wazana’s death, recalls the state of stress Wazana appeared to be in on his return from healing the girl. According to Ḥana, the girl was seven months pregnant when her father summoned Rabbi Ya’aqov:

He came to me and said, “Hana, make me a cup of tea.” I made it for him and he said, “Go and see her, someone must die today.” I went and saw her. She had given birth to a dead baby. I went back to him and said, “Rabbi Ya’aqov, she gave birth to a baby that died.” He sighed deeply and said, “So be it, now bring me arak and something to eat.” The poor man ate while holding his head in his hand. “Come here,” he said to me, “I will tell you what I did today.... The Arab gave me eight thousand lira because she was going to die. They warned me someone must die today. Now her son is dead and there has been atonement.”

If the thought ever crossed Rabbi Ya’aqov’s mind that the infant’s death might save him from the demons’ wrath, then the events of that Friday afternoon on the winding road into Agouim would have told him that healing the girl was no more than an illusory victory—the opening scene in the run-up to his death. Many of the residents of Agouim could describe these events in detail, providing notes of personal involvement, as though they had witnessed or actively participated in the proceedings. For example, Yitzhak Elmaliakh, a trader from Agouim, recounted that Rabbi Ya’aqov sat with him in his shop by the main road that Friday before taking his leave and climbing the hill to the village. From the doorway of his store Elmaliakh watched Rabbi Ya’aqov halt abruptly on the bend next to the Muslim cemetery, then glance back as if searching for something. “He didn’t see anyone, so he sat down, and thought and thought. In the
end he went home.” Some described this scene from different vantage points in the village. Rabbi Yitzḥak Pehima claimed to have accompanied Wazana when he cured the Arab girl, and to have been at Wazana’s side for that last walk into the village.

On Friday when his death was near, I went down with him to the main road. He bought three candles for the synagogue [according to more down-to-earth versions, Wazana bought either cigarettes or arak]. There is a path leading up the mountain, and I climbed up with him. Suddenly he went like this [cupped his ear, as if listening], and looked back. He asked me, “Do you hear anything?” I said, “I don’t hear anything.” He said, “There’s something wrong with me today, I don’t know what it is.” The sweat poured out of him like a stream, and he kept wiping it, but it kept on pouring.

Only later Peheima, Elmaliakh, and the rest of the watchers learned that Rabbi Ya’aqov heard a voice calling out his name from the Muslim cemetery. In traditional Morocco it was held that disappearing, disembodied voices—especially those originating from cemeteries (favored demon haunts)—belonged to demons. Wazana himself, who was closer than anyone to “those from under the ground,” once explained to the Yifrakh family when visiting their home in Timjdut that if something invisible ever called their name, “You mustn’t say yes; you mustn’t answer, until you hear it call three times. After the third time, they won’t do anything.” Yet, Wazana himself, who knew better than anyone else how to behave in such a situation, could not resist answering, and responded to the call hastily. When his answer was ignored he understood that he was doomed. During his final hours, he expressed his sense of impending doom in a number of ways. Perhaps the most poignant of all was his short conversation with Asher Azoulai, then a child of three or four, whose family lived close to Wazana. Due to the insufferably hot summer, people used to lie outside on the roof, where sleep came more easily in the cool night air. The sociable Wazana used to tease young Asher and chat with him before sleep overtook them on their adjacent roofs. That Friday however, when the child struck up conversation with Rabbi Ya’aqov, Wazana lay silent for a long time without answering. According to a neighbor who overheard, he finally whispered, “Asher, the story is over, go to sleep.”

The transformation that took place in Wazana during his final hours was most noticed by Makhluf and Aisha Ben-Ḥayim, with whom he lived in Agouim. As noted earlier, the relationship between Ben-Ḥayim and Rabbi Ya’aqov was a long and emotional one: “The Wazana family helped my family from time immemorial,” noted Makhluf. When Makhluf’s father had no male children for many years, Rabbi Avraham Wazana
blessed him, and Makhluf himself was born—the only boy in a family of four girls. We have related the story of how Rabbi Ya’aqov helped Makhluf’s wife Aisha, whose seven babies died before their first birthdays, by performing *istinzal* and summoning the she-demon responsible for their deaths. After compensating the she-demon with some boiled eggs, Aisha’s subsequent children all survived. When Aisha gave birth after the *istinzal* ceremony, Wazana joined the Ben-Ḥayim household, living with his friends for the last eighteen months of his life. Makhluf clearly recalls that Rabbi Ya’aqov ordered Aisha to wean the son born as a result of his intervention because she was pregnant once more. At exactly that time, Wazana was working on the roads which made his hair show signs of gray, and he was called by the sheikh to heal his daughter. His death followed eight days after these events.

According to Makhluf, during Wazana’s final hours he completely changed: his memory became unreliable, and he dropped things. Furthermore, he became fearful that robbers were coming to steal from him and begged not to be left alone. The Makhlufs therefore offered him a bed in the corner of the room where the family slept. Because of his condition, he missed the Sabbath services in the synagogue. “I am unwell today,” he told his kinswoman, Ḥana Buskila, “I feel I am in another world.” All of her efforts to discover what had happened to him were in vain. He kept to his bed, where Makhluf nursed him. Sweat gushed from his body. His strong nerve, the foundation of his reputation, deserted him completely, leaving him overwhelmed by a rising tide of dread and terror.

At first, Wazana refused to accept his fate. He asked his friends, the healers Rabbi Makhluf Biton and Rabbi Yitzḥak Pehima, to come to his bedside, and even tried dictating some healing formulae. It was commonly held by the informants that both these healers were also victims of demonic vengeance for trying to cure Rabbi Ya’aqov. Rabbi Makhluf Biton died within a year, and Rabbi Yitzḥak became blind in one eye. Even Wazana’s last, desperate attempt to heal himself failed: “He managed to get to his room, and picked up his pen, but he couldn’t hold it, and it dropped from his hand. He said: ‘If I could just write one letter, I could be in control (of the demons).’ But he could not write even one letter. They already had him.” After this abortive attempt, Wazana seems to have accepted his fate, and struggled no further. His former neighbors reported hearing him muttering feverishly in the darkness to unseen beings. Some conjectured that this was when he took his leave of his demonic spouse and children.

Wazana died on 27th of the month of Tammuz, in the hours between Friday and Saturday, in fact, during the Three Weeks (Bein Hametsarim).³ Before drawing his final breath sometime between three or four in the morning, he let out three blood-curdling screams that could be heard from one end of the village to another. His shrieks, reminiscent of “an animal
being slaughtered,” pierced the dreams of the people of Agouim lying asleep on their roofs. They ran to him, only to discover his lifeless body sprawled across the floor. Blood was spurting from his throat, spattering the whole room.4

The powerful impact of these events on the Jews of Agouim can be measured by the story that reached the ears of one informant from Tamzersht: “The neighbors heard him screaming the loudest sound you have ever heard: ‘AAAAGGGHHH’ [he demonstrated], three times, like that. They went in, and found him like a burned body, like he had been hit by a bomb. They found his throat completely burned.” All who knew Wazana were convinced that his death was caused by the demons he had defied.5 “If you betray them, they get you,” was the popular verdict.

Due to the fact that Wazana died between Friday night and Saturday morning and could therefore only be buried on Sunday (according to Jewish law, burial is forbidden on the Sabbath), his blood-soaked room filled with a ghastly stench, and the swollen, fetid body stank terribly. In the burning heat of the end of August, his friends from Agouim bore his heavy corpse—he was, as we know, a tall, well-built man—up the steep hillside to the village cemetery where they buried him. Although none of the informants had returned to their former home in Morocco, they nevertheless assured me that Wazana’s grave is dutifully tended by a Berber woman he once cured of childlessness by removing a spell.6

Some informants were inclined to deduce lessons of distinctly moral nature from the circumstances of Rabbi Ya’aqov’s death. One popular lesson related to a person’s prescribed place within the universal scheme and the dire consequences of deviating from it. Expressions such as “they set limits for him,” or “they gave him a limit and he crossed it,” were frequently voiced. Whether implicitly or explicitly stated, these informants see the events surrounding Wazana’s death as a punishment for crossing the red line and trespassing on forbidden territory. We have already noted the recurrent use of such phrases as “going into,” “leaving,” “do not enter,” “keep out,” and also the demarcation line of the threshold to the house where the demons tried to prevent Wazana from entering.

Not unrelated to this is the way some informants portrayed the risk of a too great proximity to the demons’ menacing world. Their conclusions were unequivocal. “Whoever plays games with snakes, gets bitten in the end,” said Rabbi Yitzhak Peḥima, while someone else compared Wazana’s intimacy with the demons to “playing with fire.” Apart from the obvious risks involved in messing with snakes or fire, these are images particularly associated with demons. Demons often disguise themselves as snakes, and we have seen the snake motif appear in the story of the sheikh’s daughter who, by killing the demons disguised as snakes, sparked off the train of events which ultimately cost Wazana his life. Demons are attracted to fire, and, according to one explanation, fire is one of the elements
from which they are formed. One informant who discussed the problem of having too close an association with demons offered an interesting analogy taken from family life: “If a wife betrays her husband, he must divorce her. You betray them [the demons], they do away with you.” It is interesting that in this analogy, the husband, that is, the man, represents the demons, while the wife stands for the men, who, like Wazana, consort with the demons. In Wazana’s case the complete reverse is true, since he, the male, took the she-demon for a wife. Does the reversal implicit in this analogy allude to the “femininity” of the men who preferred a wife from “under the ground” to a normal, human woman? This question will be discussed shortly.

Another object lesson Wazana’s acquaintances considered as they related the story of his death concerns the relationship with neighbors “above the ground”—the Muslim Arabs and Berbers among whom the Jews lived. The informants were clearly aware that the chain of events leading to Wazana’s tragic death was set in motion when he healed the sheikh’s daughter against the demons’ express wish. The possibility that
he had been coerced into healing the girl was never explicitly raised. The opposite in fact was true: all versions highlighted Wazana’s enthusiasm and determination to carry out this act. It should be recalled, however, that in the past, Rabbi Ya’aqov had been forced to treat the sheikh of Talouine’s son (resulting in his unfortunate absence from home at the time of his mother’s death). In recounting the case of the sheikh’s daughter, some informants implied that the generous reward, “the bribe,” offered him by the girl’s father was a form of pressure. The story of Wazana thus seems to contain a lesson on the perils of being too intimate with either the demonic world or the surrounding Muslim environment. These dangers are embodied in the phrasing used in some stories, in which a twofold explanation for Wazana’s death is offered: that “the demons slaughtered him at night,” and that “the Arab girl killed him.”

Indeed, the inversion in the story of Wazana’s demise, whereby the sheikh’s daughter “arose from her sickbed and was restored to health, while Wazana became sick and died,” is greatly emphasized in the tales. The reverse symmetry is highlighted both in the moral issue of retribution and restoration of balance embedded in the core of the plot (the death of the demonic children cannot be ignored, therefore, their killer or the girl’s savior must forfeit his life: “someone must die”), and in the popular Moroccan belief in “affliction transference.” The possibility that the sheikh’s daughter “transferred” her affliction to Rabbi Ya’aqov is especially appealing in the light of the promise by the demon possessing her that he would avenge himself on the healer for expelling him. This would mean that the demon who attacked her was also the one who dealt Rabbi Ya’aqov the mortal blow. Even if the sheikh’s daughter was not afflicted by aslai (possession), in which case Wazana certainly did not exorcise the attacking demon from her body, the option of affliction transference remains valid. One version of the healing mentions that the girl recovered after throwing the charm Wazana had written for her into the Muslim cemetery in Agouim. Presumably this charm was designed to attack the demon responsible for her disorder, who resided in the cemetery. Indeed, the disappearing voice heard by Wazana at the bend in the road, which everyone regards as signaling his doom, came from that very cemetery.

A number of Wazana’s friends, keen to mold his figure along the lines of the family tsaddiqim who had preceded him, minimized the extent of his association with the Arabs. They chose to emphasize Wazana’s devotion to his calling, which led him to sacrifice his life for the Arab girl. This picture of courageous self-sacrifice emerged, for example, in the discussion that took place at the home of David Ben-Hamo in Atseret, in which many of the family, young and old alike, participated. David recalled: “She [the Arab girl] killed him, because he was forbidden to heal her.” A neighbor added: “He was forbidden to do it, but he was prepared
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to sacrifice his life to save her life.” “And did he save her?” queried David’s wide-eyed, young grandson, “Yes,” answered the family in chorus, “and that is why he died.”

The presence and personal involvement of the informants are more conspicuous in the story of Wazana’s death than in any other event of the healer’s life. It appears that dozens of eyes followed his progress that Friday, documenting each step on his final journey. Rabbi Yitzhak Pehimama accompanied him to the sheikh’s home, and is at his side when Wazana heard the voice calling his name. In the evening, when Pehimama came to supper with him, bringing with him an ox liver from the slaughterhouse, he found him confined to bed, his condition critical. Yitzhak Elmaliakh and other Agouim store owners observed his last walk to the village. Makhluf Ben-Hayim nursed him on his deathbed at home, and Hana Buskila, Wazana’s kinswoman, did the same. Other Agouim residents recall emotion-laden details connected with the events of that fateful Friday (we have noted already the farewell exchange with the neighbors’ young son, Asher). Even people whose homes lay far from Agouim claim to have been in the area prior to his death. His kinsmen Ya’aqov and Shaul Wazana, from far-off Ouarzazate, met him near the shrine of Rabbi David u-Moshe (outside Agouim), and heard the story of healing the sheikh’s daughter from his own lips. It seems that all roads led to Agouim in those late summer days. All were gathered there, watching in wonder and fascination as the events of Rabbi Ya’aqov’s death unfolded. The pervasive and profound sense of identification with the figure they describe is most evident in the dramatic and distressful descriptions of his death. Involvement draws them closer to the events, and by amplifying the

Shrine of Rabbi David u-Moshe near Agouim (Western High Atlas Mountains)
details with personal, subjective volume, an affective note of participation is added. Perhaps we should see this as a fantasy wish on the part of the informants, who, when all is said and done, are merely background figures, extras in the spectacular plot they have laid out before us. They appear anxious to immortalize their own place in the story of Wazana’s life, to push forward onto center stage, which, for one last transitory moment, is lit, before the curtain falls on the story of Wazana’s life.