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On Demons

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Abstract

The year was 1966. The sixties were at their height, though we did not know it then. It was two years after the Beatles had landed in New York, and a year before the Six Day War. The Democratic convention in Chicago was still two years away. A group of us, all Israelis, came to UCLA, each for his own reasons. Ruth Kartun-Blum and her husband Amos were there, and so were Ella and Dan Almagor. Professor Joseph Dan, Yossi to his friends, who was the most academically senior among us, came to teach in the Near Eastern Languages and Literatures Department, substituting for Professor Arnold Band who was at the Hebrew University that year. This was Yossi's first visit to the United States. I had just returned from Nigeria and had a one year appointment in the Anthropology Department at UCLA. We all knew each other, at least casually, from the Giva'at Ram campus of the Hebrew University and from the Hebrew Literature Department. In Los Angeles we became friends.

Disciplines

Cultural History | Folklore | Jewish Studies | Near and Middle Eastern Studies

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The year was 1966. The sixties were at their height, though we did not know it then. It was two years after the Beatles had landed in New York, and a year before the Six Day War. The Democratic convention in Chicago was still two years away. A group of us, all Israelis, came to UCLA, each for his own reasons. Ruth Kartun-Blum and her husband Amos were there, and so were Ella and Dan Almagor. Professor Joseph Dan, Yossi to his friends, who was the most academically senior among us, came to teach in the Near Eastern Languages and Literatures Department, substituting for Professor Arnold Band who was at the Hebrew University that year. This was Yossi's first visit to the United States. I had just returned from Nigeria and had a one year appointment in the Anthropology Department at UCLA. We all knew each other, at least casually, from the Giva'at Ram campus of the Hebrew University and from the Hebrew Literature Department. In Los Angeles we became friends.

In the UCLA library Yossi found the two volumes of Caesarius of Heisterbach (c.1170 or 1180–c. 1240)¹ that Professor Hayyim Hillel Ben-Sasson had recommended to him after he, Yossi, published his essay on demonological stories in *Sefer Hasidim*,² and was working, among other things, on a study that later became his seminal essay "Rabbi Judah the Pious and Caesarius of Heisterbach – Common Motifs in their Stories."³ Although Gershom Scholem (and other scholars) preceded Joseph Dan in the analysis of Jewish demonology, he was, at the time, probably one of the few main-stream scholars of demons in Judaica who resorted to folklore methodology and to comparative analysis.

Outside of the library, other demons lured him from the path of the righteous. Under the endless summer of southern California, Joan Baez was to appear in

¹ Caesarius of Heisterbach, *The Dialogue on Miracles*. 2 vols. H. von E. Scott and C. C. Swinton Bland, translators, with an introduction by G. G. Coulton. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1929).

² Dan, J. "Demonological Stories in the Writings of R. Yehudah Hehasid," *Tarbiz* 30 (1961): 288–289 [Hebrew].

³ In *Studies in Aggadah and Folk-Literature*. J. Heinemann and D. Noy, editors. *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 22. (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1971), pp. 18–27.

Los Angeles, and to Yossi's chagrin the scheduled day for the concert was Friday night. What to do? Yossi admired her singing, but he was concerned about the Sabbath. Not that he was, what was called in those remote days, *yehudi dati*, an observant Jew, but still, after so many years of delving into Jewish mysticism and spirituality, even if for purely scholarly purposes, sparks of religiosity hovered above him. Certainly the torment of choice between welcoming Joan Baez and the Sabbath Queen were not as profound as, say, the pangs of faith that the heroes of Chaim Potok's novels experienced, but yet they were not, and could not, be taken lightly.

From the day the concert was announced Yossi's religious conscious was hovering between the stricture of the Sabbath rule and the lure of the forbidden. And finally, like many sages before him, he succumbed, telling me, the "resident folklorist" in the bunch: "Buy the tickets." Years later when he visited me in Philadelphia, he brought me the CD "The Best of Joan Baez." At the time I did not even have a CD player, but both of us smiled and enjoyed the sweetness of recollection.

Did Yossi succumb to a demonic force that led him astray from the path of the righteous people? Christian theology, common parlance, and even psychoanalytical theory, indeed may conceive of internal demonic forces that drive us, mortals, to perform acts that counter our normative, cultural or religiously prescribed, value laden, ideal behavior. But in Jewish traditional culture such forces, though internal, are not demonic. Rather Jewish tradition, since the post-biblical era, makes a distinction between the internal forces that shape human conduct, and the external forces that threaten us and from which we need protection. The internal forces are impulses (*yezarim*) which are conceived in manichaeistic terms as *tov* (good) and *ra* (evil), while the external forces, which in medieval mystical literature and onward are so named *hizonyim*, exist outside the human body, abode, and sphere and either threaten people, or lure them into the trans-human territory of the world.

To be sure, these external forces do not just hover in the ether, but reside, or hide, in specific locations in and around human habitation. These places can be outside any populated area like the desert. or in liminal territory, between and betwixt – the areas of cognitive incongruity – the danger zones of the world in which human beings are vulnerable.⁴

The legends and nomenclature of the demonic world in Jewish tradition reflect historical changes in worldview and the conceptions of these external threatening forces, as they evolved and diversified in Israelite and then Jewish societies. In the biblical scripture there is already a range of terms for demons

⁴ See Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Praeger, 1966).

and it is possible to delineate their use in relation to forms of discourse and thematic contexts. The term *shedim* (demons) that in later period and in modern times has become the primary signifier of demons, occurs in the Hebrew Bible in poetic discourse, in polemical relation to forbidden ritualistic sacrifice: יזבחו לאלהים לא אלה "They sacrificed to demons, no gods," (Deuteronomy 32:17) and "Their own sons and daughters they sacrificed to demons" (Psalms 106:37).

The second term *se'irim*, appears in prescriptive and descriptive texts of ritual concern as well, for example: "... that they may offer their sacrifices no more to the goat-demons" (Leviticus 17:7) and "for Jeroboam... appointed his own priests for the shrines, goat-demons, and calves which he had made" (2 Chronicles 11:14–15). In each case the Hebrew Bible attaches a negative value to the *shedim* and the *se'irim*.

In the prophecy of Isaiah the term *se'irim* occurs not in ritualistic context but rather in descriptive terms associating these figures with other supernatural harmful beings that occupy liminal spaces like ruins. These are deteriorating human constructions that gravitate toward the state of nature.

ורבצו-שם ציים ומלאו בתיהם אחים ושכנו שם בנות יענה ושעירים ירקדו שם
 "There shall ostriches make their home, and there shall satyrs dance" (Isaiah 13:21), and "פגשו ציים את-איים ושעיר על-רעהו יקרא אך-שם הרגיעה לילית ומצאה לה מנוח
 "Wildcats shall meet hyenas, goat-demons shall greet each other; there too the lilith shall repose, and find herself a resting place" (Isaiah 34:14).

While the term *shedim* may derive from the Akkadic *sedu*, a good spirit, representing a reversal of value attribution to an antagonistic religious system, the term *se'irim* refers to a creature that has the animal characteristic of hairy body, representing the ultimate opposite to a human being, the "otherness" of humanity. Besides these general terms, the Hebrew Bible mentions individual demons such as *Lilith*, (Isaiah 34:14), and *Azazel* (Leviticus 16:8, 10, 26). Others may bear the names of their actions or their consequences. Hence in some contexts they are either metaphors for, or actual names of, supernatural forces that are agents causing diseases or disasters. Among them are: "Death" (*mavet*) (Isaiah 28:15, 18; Jeremiah 9:20; Hosea 13:14, Job 18:13); "the Destroyer" (*hamashhit*) (Exodus 12:23) or more specifically "the angel who was destroying" (2 Samuel 24:15–17) and "the destroying angel" (1 Chronicles 21:15); "Pestilence" or "plague" (*dever*) (Habakkuk 3:5; Psalms 91:6), or (*qetev*) [modern translation, but exact meaning unclear] (Deuteronomy 32:24; Isaiah 28:2; Hosea 13:14; Psalms 91:6). The only Canaanite deity that was demonized is *Resheph*, the deity of plague (Deuteronomy 33:24; Habakkuk 3:5; Psalms 78:48), whose name in other contexts means fiery flashes.

The only clearly demonized animal is the snake (*nahash*) represented symbolically as a fiery serpent, (*saraph*, pl. *seraphim*) (Numbers 21:6–9; Isaiah

14:29, 30:6). In both cases, however, the biblical terms hover between the referential and the metaphoric, between the literal and the poetic.⁵

Some biblical terms have acquired a demonic connotation, in later periods, though in the Hebrew Bible itself their evil supernatural character is not necessarily apparent. For example the description of King Saul's depression (1 Samuel 19:8) contains the phrase *ru'ah ra'ah* ("evil spirit"), a term that in subsequent periods has become a common term for demonic forces. Similarly in Psalms 78:49 the Hebrew text refers to "wrath, indignation, trouble" as *mish-laḥat mal'akhim ra'im* ("a band of [bad angels]") a term that in later periods would refer to demonic beings. Furthermore, this is the first textual distinction between the conceptual opposition of good and bad angels that is to be influential in the Second Temple period and beyond.

Whether suppressed by the Hebrew Bible, as Langton⁶ contends, or theologically subjected to the domination of God as Kaufmann⁷ proposes, the biblical references to demons and demonic forces are scant. During the period of the Second Temple, after Jewish society had been exposed to Persian and Greek demonologies, and the control over the preservation of texts had considerably weakened, we find an eruption of references to demons in the literary and religious writings of the period, ranging from the Apocalyptic and Pseudepigraphic books to the texts of the Dead Sea Scrolls.⁸

Some of the names for demonic beings of the Hebrew Bible survived in the Dead Sea Scrolls. P. S. Alexander identifies in the Scrolls "(1) spirits of the angels of destruction (רוחות מלאכי חבל); (2) spirits of the bastards (רוחות ממזרים);

⁵ See Joanne K. Kuemmerlin-McLean, "Demons," *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, D. N. Freedman, editor (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 2:138–140. D. R. Hillers, "Demons, Demonology," *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (1971), 5:1521–1526; E. Langton, *Essential of Demonology: A Study of Jewish and Christian Doctrine, Its Origin and Development*. London: The Epworth Press, 1949 [Reprint edition: New York: AMS Press, 1982], pp. 35–59.

⁶ Op.cit. p. 10.

⁷ Y. Kaufman, *The Religion of Israel from the Beginning to the Babylonian Exile*. M. Greenberg, translator (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960), pp. 63–67.

⁸ See Ph. S. Alexander, "The Demonology of the Dead Sea Scrolls," pp. 331–353 in *The Dead Sea Scrolls After Fifty Years: A Comprehensive Assessment*, P. W. Flint and J. C. Vanderkam, editors (Leiden: Brill, 1999); and the comments upon this essay in A. M. Reimer, "Rescuing the Fallen Angels: The Case of the Disappearing Angels of Qumran," *DSD* 7 (2000): 334–353; I. Fröhlich, "Demons, Scribes, and Exorcists in Qumran," pp. 73–81 in *Essays in Honour of Alexander Fodor on his Sixtieth Birthday*, K. Dévényi and T. Ivanyi, editors (Budapest: Eötvös Loránd University Chair for Arabic Studies), D. T. Iványi, editor; B. Nitzan, "Hymns from Qumran 'לפחד ולבהל' Evil Ghosts," *Tarbiz* 55 (1985–1986): 19–46 [Hebrew]; idem, *Qumran Prayer and Religious Poetry*, pp. 227–272, and see the following comments on her article: J. M. Baumgarten, "The Qumran songs Against Demons," *Tarbiz* 55 (1985–1986): 442–445 [Hebrew]; I. Ta-Shema, "Notes to 'Hymns from Qumran,'" *Tarbiz* 55 (1985–1986): 440–442 [Hebrew]; L. T. Stuckenbruck, "The 'Angels' and 'Giants' of Genesis 6:1–4 in Second and Third Century BCE Jewish Interpretation: Reflections on the Posture of Early Apocalyptic Traditions," *DSD* 7 (2000): 354–377.

(3) demons (שדים); (4) Lilith (לילית); (5) howlers (אחים); (6) yelpers (צייים)” the last three of which are mentioned in Isaiah 34:14. Other biblical demons also appear, their names connoting their actions like “destroyer” (משחית) (Exodus 12:23) or “the destroying angel” (המלאך המשחית).⁹

At the same time new demonic forces make their appearance in the Apocryphal books. Most prominent of those is Asmodeus who in the Book of Tobit (3:8–17) is the “Evil Demon” who kills Sarah’s seven husbands on their nuptial night; in Testament of Solomon he declares: “I cause the wickedness of men to spread throughout the world. I am always hatching plots against newlyweds; I mar the beauty of virgins and cause their hearts to grow cold” (5:7, see 1–13). While Asmodeus would be known in Jewish tradition the King of the Demons (BT *Gittin* 68a),¹⁰ in the apocryphal and Pseudepigraphic literature, other demonic figures are at the head of the demonic world. One is Beliar (Belial) (Jubilees 1:20, 15:33; Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs 2:1 [note a], 4:7 [note c]).¹¹ Allusions to Beliar (Belial) occur both in the Apocryphal literature and the Dead Sea Scrolls and considerable research has been done on this demonic figure.¹² Another figure with a limited representation during this period, but whose stature would increase exponentially in the rabbinic and mystical literature, is Sammael. The author of the Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah refers to him as “Sammael Malkira” (“King of Evil”) (1:8)¹³. M. A. Knibb, suggests that Sammael, Beliar, and Satan are interchangeable names of the forces of evil¹⁴ but in the above cited passages Beliar and Sammael are struggling with each other as two distinct forces. Sammael is also called “The Prince of the Accusers” (3 Enoch 14:2 [note 14b]), and “Prince of Rome” (3 Enoch 26:12).

⁹ Ph. S. Alexander, op. cit. p. 333.

¹⁰ See Bin Gurion, *Mimekor Yisrael: Classical Jewish Folktales, Annotated Edition* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990) Nos. 28, pp. 49–51; No.40, pp. 74–77. No. 200, pp. 373–384.

¹¹ J. H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*. (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1983) “Index” 2:932.

¹² For some selected studies see: Langton, op. cit. pp. 125–128; P. von der Osten-Sacken, *Gott und Belial*; G. Scholem [Shalom], “Bilar (Bilad, bilid, BEAIAR) the King of the Demons,” *Mada’ei ha-Yahadut* 1(1926): 112–127 [Hebrew]; A. Steudel, “God and Belial,” pp. 332–340 in *The Dead Sea Scrolls Fifty Years after Their Discovery*, L. H. Schiffman, E. Tov and J. C. VanderKam, editors (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 2000). For interpretations of the biblical use of this name see J. A. Emerton, “Sheol and the Sons of Belial,” *VT* 37 (1987): 214–218; R. Rosenberg, “The Concept of Biblical “Belial,” *WCJS* 8, 1 (1982) 35–40; D. W. Thomas, “בליעל in the Old Testament,” pp. 11–19 in *Biblical and Patristic Studies in Memory of Robert Pierce Casey*. J. N. Birdsall and R. W. Thomson, editors (Freiburg: Herder, 1963); the prince of the demon in the writings of this period is Mastema, a name that means “animosity”, but it occurs only in the book of Jubilee (Jubilee 10:1–14, esp. 8; 11:11–13; 17:15–18:13; 48:2, 12). See Langton, op. cit. pp. 124–125.

¹³ The text mentions him without this epithet on other occasions (1:11, 2:1, 3:13, 5:15–16; 7:9).

¹⁴ Charlesworth, op. cit., p. 151.

In the apocryphal and pseudepigraphic literature, the demonic names of Satan and Sammael became synonymous, retaining the attributes of Satan from Job 1:6–2:10. Satan is the head of the “angels of plague” (1 Enoch 53:3), “the messengers of Satan, [lead] astray those who dwell upon the earth” (1 Enoch 54:6). As an evil force Satan preceded the demonic descendants of the Watchers and he fell from his position in heaven because of his temptation of Adam and Eve (Life of Adam and Eve 12–17). Satan is an adversary and challenger of man, sometime referred to as “the devil;” he is the head of destroying angels, but not of demons as Asmodeus would be later conceived.

This literature is teeming with demonic figures. The Testament of Solomon narrates how Solomon “subdued all the spirits of the air” (1:1) and then proceeds to identify some, if not all, of them. The (Ethiopic Apocalypse of) Enoch constructs a mythic narrative that contrasts sharply with the biblical narrative upon which it is founded. According to the Hebrew Bible “[i]t was then, and later too, that the Nephilim appeared on earth – when the divine beings cohabited with the daughters of men, who bore them offspring. They were the heroes of old, the men of renown” (Genesis 6:4). But according to 1 Enoch, rather than heroic, the descendants of the union between divine beings and mortal women, became demonic. They were the destructive forces that oppressed humanity and, in response to the outcry of mankind, God sent the angel Gabriel to destroy them. As they were lying dead upon the earth “[e]vil spirits have come out of their bodies” (1 Enoch 15:8). This is a key tale about the nature of demons to which I shall later return.

Being direct issues of divine creatures the “evil spirits” have been re-conceptualized at this period as “fallen angels,” thus offering a narrative foundation for the dualism of the world of the spirits. However, the analysis of the names of the heads of the demonic forces and the evil spirits in the Apocryphal books may not accurately reflect the historical conception of the negative world of the spirits because the texts are available to us in translations.¹⁵

¹⁵ See B. J. Bamberger, *Fallen Angels* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1952); J. G. Gammie, “The Angelology and Demonology in the Septuagint of the Book of Job,” *HUCA* 56 (1985): 1–19; E. Langton, *Essential of Demonology*, pp. 61–144; D. S. Russell, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic*, pp. 235–262; for a discussion of Jewish demonology in the context of classical and Christian demonologies see V. Flint, “The Demonisation of Magic and Sorcery in Late Antiquity: Christian Redefinitions of Pagan Religions,” pp. 277–348, esp. 292–296 in *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: Ancient Greece and Rome*, B. Ankarloo and S. Clark, editors (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002). For an examination of the figure of Samael (Sammael) from Jewish apocryphal literature, through early Gnostic sources, early and late talmudic-midrashic literature, Hekhalot and Merkabah and medieval kabbalistic books see J. Dan, “Samael and the problem of Jewish Gnosticism,” pp. 257–276 in *Perspectives on Jewish Thought and Mysticism*. A. L. Ivry, E. R. Wolfson, and A. Arkush, editors (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1998); idem, “The Desert in Jewish Mysticism; the Kingdom of Samael,” *Ariel* 40 (1976) 38–43.

By the talmudic and midrashic period it appears that all the barriers to mentioning of the demonic world had been broken down. At that time and in the subsequent geonic period there was another surge in references to demons. These occur in abundance in the Babylonian Talmud Rabbinic literature, especially the Midrashim, edited in the Land of Israel. In addition, demons are mentioned in magic books and inscriptions that are designed to combat them, thus extending this literature up to the Geonic period.

It is possible to discern four distinct changes in the attitudes toward demons in the literature of this period:

(i) *The canonization of demons.* While demons never became objects of religious worship, the knowledge of them and their language was attributed to central figures of that period, some of whom are also the subjects of stories about interaction with demons. Prominent rabbis, Hillel the Elder (end of 1st century BCE beginning of 1st century CE), and Johanan ben Zakkai (1st century CE) are said to have knowledge of the language of demons. “It was said of Hillel that he had not omitted to study any of the words of the Sages, even all languages, even the speech of the mountains, hills and valleys, the speech of trees, and herbs, the speech of wild beasts and cattle, the speech of demons and parables” (minor tractate *Soferim* 16:9); and “[t]hey said of R. Johanan b Zakkai that he did not leave [unstudied] Scripture, Mishna, Gemara, *Halachah*, *Aggadah*, details of the Torah, details of the Scribes, inferences a minori ad majus, analogies, calendar computations, gematrias, the speech of the Ministering Angels, the speech of the spirits [original: *shedim*, (“demons”)] ...” (BT *Sukkah* 28a). A text from the Geonic period, attributed to Rabbi Akiva, the leading 2nd century rabbi, includes a series of magical protective anti-demonic incantations¹⁶. Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai, a leading second century rabbi, saved the Jewish community of Rome, according to one story, with the help of a demon (BT *Me’ilah* 17b). These and other traditions, propel the discourse with demons from the margins to the core of rabbinic religion.

(ii) *Demonic names.* During the rabbinic period the use of earlier terms for demons increased many fold and some new terms appeared as well. The biblical *shed* (pl. *shedim*) is a commonplace in the Talmud and midrash. (In contrast, the use of the term *se’ir* (satyr), more common in the Hebrew Bible, decreased in use, and became unintelligible to speakers at that era.) An exegetical interpretation is necessary to gloss the term for the contemporary audience: “these satyrs are nought but demons, as is borne out by the text which says, *They sacrificed unto demons, no gods* (Deuteronomy 32:17), these demons being nought but satyrs, as it says, *And the satyrs shall dance there* (Isaiah 13:21)” (MR *Leviticus* 22:5). Similarly the rabbis gloss the biblical words *reshef* and

¹⁶ See G. Scholem, “Havdala De-Rabbi ‘Aqiva – A source for the Tradition of Jewish Magic During the Geonic Period,” *Tarbiz* 50 (1980–1981): 243–281 [Hebrew].

qetev: “And ‘*reshef*’ refers only to demons” (BT *Berakoth* 5a) and ‘*qetev*’ is a demon (MR Numbers 12:3). In addition to the confirmation of the meaning of old terms by current nomenclature, previous terms whose reference to demons was ambiguous, consolidate their meanings as demonic terms, as for example *mal'akhei habala* (“angles of destruction”) and *ru'ah ra'ah* (“evil spirit”) (1 Samuel 16;14). A new term for demons that is absent from the literatures of the previous periods is *mazik* (pl. *mazikkim*) (“harmful one”), referring to the demonic function in relation to human beings. The term occurs already in the Mishnah, where it appears only once (Avot 5:6), but on numerous occasions in the talmudic-midrashic books.

(iii) *Hierarchy in the demonic world*. As shown above, already in the Apocryphal literature there are clear though fluid indications of a conception of social, even military organization in the demonic world. In the talmudic-midrashic period the hierarchy of spirits of evil becomes, comparably, fixed. Asmodeus is “the king of Demons” (BT *Pesahim* 110a; *Gittin* 68a–68b), and he retains his position in later popular medieval tradition (Bin Gorion, op. cit.) But another tradition equates, or associates, Sammael with both Satan and the Angel of Death, considering him to be the leading demon (Enoch 14:2; 26:12; in a later midrash see MR Deuteronomy 11:10). While during the talmudic-midrashic period, both Asmodeus and Sammael consolidated their positions at the head of the demonic world, they remain distinct figures with mutual exclusive domains in which they affect the lives of human beings. In subsequent periods Sammael is dominant primarily within the mystical literature, whereas Asmodeus rules in popular narratives.

(iv) *World View of the Demonic World*. From the multiple references to demons in the talmudic-midrashic literature, two aspects of the demon world take clearer shape. First, both assume the invisibility of demons, considering them to exist in a virtual reality that is rarely made visible or audible to mortals, yet effecting them in every step of the way. Given this, they differ in positioning demons in relationship to people. According to the first idea demons are lurking everywhere, unseen they surround an individual. “If the eye had the power to see them, no creature could endure the demons. Abaye says: They are more numerous than we are and they surround us like the ridge around a field. R. Huna says: Every one among us has a thousand on his left hand and ten thousand on his right hand” (BT *Berakoth* 6a). (This is, among other things, a proposition about the relationship between appearance and reality, which casts doubt about the perception of the world through human sensibility.) A second conception drawn from this material shows that demons are inherently liminal spirits. They were created in the twilight on the Eve of the Sabbath, in a liminal zone between profane and holy time (Avot 5:6), and continue to exist in liminal locations such as ruins (BT *Berakoth* 3a), in the inaccessible areas of buildings (BT *Hulin* 105a) and in inland water holes, wells, and ponds (MR *Leviticus*

24:3; Tanhuma, *Kedoshim* 9; BT *Pesahim* 112a). In some of these tales, as in the story from MR *Leviticus* op.cit. the demons are conceived as “owners” of the water source.¹⁷ They are more likely to attack people at night, and particularly in transitional periods when time shifts categories from light to night or vice versa or from holy to profane time.

The perception of demonic activities in liminal times and spaces has continued to the present and modern ethnographic studies in Jewish communities cast light on the demonology in Jewish societies in antiquity. While there are differences as well as similarities between the modern and the ancient period, modern observations permit an insight into the dynamics of demons in culture and society.¹⁸

The anti-demonic magic formulas and incantations on special bowls, amulets, and prayers offer a rich source for understanding the demonic beliefs of that period.¹⁹

By the middle ages the fundamental conception of the demonic world had been formed. No doubt, mysticism and the encounter with other cultures and belief systems in Europe, Asia, and North Africa would add dimensions and nuances to Jewish demonology, but narratives and beliefs consistently based themselves on the foundation that was laid in the first millennia before and within the current era.

In spite of the documentation of the belief in demons and the serious research that applied to this belief among the Israelites and the Jews, one central issue seems to escape analytical attention. Demons are known and described by their actions, but what are they? What kind of creatures are the demons. How do they come into existence and what is their reality as conceived and imagined by the people who believe in them? I would like to propose that one of the early essays of Professor Joseph Dan, a significant contribution that he made to Jewish demonology that did not receive sufficient attention, offers some help. This essay, “The Prince of Thumb and Cup,” (*Tarbiz* 32 [1963]:359–69) was published in Hebrew shortly after he completed his doctorate. It is a brief article, and characteristic of Professor Dan’s work, it involves an analysis of historically framed texts in which he offers an apparently minor correction in textual reading that not only offers insightful new interpretations, but also sets the stage for a major conceptual development. The essay deals with divination

¹⁷ For a discussion of the demonic possession of nature in European traditions see A. Hultkrantz, ed. *The Supernatural Owners of Nature*. For a similar conception in the Near East see T. Canaan, “Haunted Springs and Water Demons in Palestine,” *JPOS* 1 (1920–1921): 153–170.

¹⁸ See Y. Bilu, “Demonic Explanations of Disease among Moroccan Jews in Israel,” *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* 3 (1979): 363–380; idem, “The Moroccan Demon in Israel: The Case of ‘Evil Spirit Disease’,” *Ethos* 8 (1980): 24–39.

¹⁹ See Y. Harari, “Early Jewish Magic: Methodological and Phenomenological Studies,” Doctoral Dissertation (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University, 1998), pp. 151–155.

practices that involve "שרי כוס", "שרי בוהן", "שרי כף", "שרי צפורן", "שרי מראה", and other terms that are members in a group of שרי שמן (BT *Sanhedrin* 101a). Without getting into the details of Professor Dan's analysis, he makes a simple, but significant proposal for reading the text: Instead of the "ר" he proposes to read a "ד", thus suggesting that all these terms refer to different types of demons and the acts of divination involved in their discovery for protective purposes. Although Professor Dan does not pursue the issue, the demons of the fingernails to which at least two of the terms refer, occur in a ritualistic examination of the fingernails at the *havdalah* service.²⁰

How are demons related to fingernails, and why is it incumbent on pious Jews to bury fingernails after cutting them? Already the talmudic sages were aware of the demonic power of disposed body parts, fingernails among them. In the Babylonian Talmud there is a cautionary statement, attributed to Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai (2nd century), who counts "removing one's nails and throwing them away in a public thoroughfare" as one of five things which "[cause the man] who does them to forfeit his life and his blood is upon his own head." Such an act, later rabbis contend, demonstrates a total lack of care for others because "[this is dangerous] because a pregnant woman passing over them would miscarry." Therefore, "[t]hree things have been said about the disposal of nails: He who burns them is a pious man; he who buries them is a righteous man, and he who throws them away is a wicked man" (BT *Niddah* 17a). What demonic and destructive power could reside within discarded fingernails?

An examination of the origin myths of demons may shed light upon this practice and on the way demons are imagined in Jewish traditions. There are two fundamental myths about this subject. The first, in the First Book of Enoch, suggests that demons emerged from the dead bodies of the descendants of the union between divine beings and mortal women (1 Enoch 15:8). The second myth proposes that demons grow out of male sperm that is ejaculated not into but outside a female body. The seductive goddess, or a demonic female is conceived as the cause for such (purposeful or accidental) occurrences.²¹ While these two origin myths seem to propose two different narratives and conceptions of the nature of demons, they share in common one principle: they conceive of the origin of demons in human organic matter that is put to waste. While discarded, the human waste still maintains its human vitality. Albeit this biological energy lacks natural form and is not contained in any shape or body.

Origin myths are not simply etiological narratives, satisfying the curious intellectual pursuit of the non-scientific mind. Rather, they offer philosophi-

²⁰ S.B. Finesinger, "The Custom of Looking at the Fingernails at the Outgoing of the Sabbath," *HUCA* 12-13 (1937-1938): 347-365; D. Noy, "*Histaklut ba-zipornayim bi-sh'at ha-havdalah*" ("Observing the Fingernails During the Havdalah") *Mahanayim* 85-86: 166-173.

²¹ R. Patai, *The Hebrew Goddess*. Third Enlarged Edition. Jewish Folklore and Anthropology (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990), pp. 221-254.

cal propositions about the nature of things and beings. They articulate ideas in narratives rather than in statements, and as such, they have a powerful impact on culture, thought and conduct, representing world-views that had been otherwise unrecognized. The creation myths of demons explain their power and danger to organized society and fully formed biological beings. They are the unformed and unrestrained organic energy of life. Any release of body parts into nature, any human elimination, is a potential source of negative power, because it is released into nature and is freed from its divinely created form. The constant battles between people and demons are hence a conflict between created, restrained, and disciplined energy and between loose and uncontrolled powers whose source is none else than the human body that they subsequently threaten.

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