

## Halloween and Judaism: Things that Go Bump In The Night

It's unfortunate that some synagogues avoid Halloween festivities, thinking that Halloween is somehow "not-Jewish", that a celebration of a magical, mystical, spooky world is somehow outside of Judaism. The truth is that we too have ghosts and goblins, spooks and monsters.

Our oldest netherworld manifestation was known to the Israelites as an "evil spirit" and is referenced in Scripture and rabbinic literature. In I Samuel 18:10 we read of a *ruach elohim ra'ah*, "an evil spirit of God" as briefly attaching itself to King Saul, the first king of the ancient tribes of Israel. Later, in the Book of Kings, the prophet Elijah is possessed by the spirit of a dead man who is trying to get the prophet to trick the king into going to war when he wasn't supposed to.

The word *dybbuk* [pronounced DI-bik] that we have come to associate with such an evil spirit, does not appear in rabbinic or Kabalistic literature-- there it is only *ruach ra'ah*. The designation as *dybbuk* only comes later, derived from the Hebrew *l'davek* meaning "to cling to", thus *dibook* is an "attachment". The *dybbuk* attaches itself to the body of a living person and inhabits it. Accordingly, a soul that has not been able to fulfill its function in this lifetime is given another opportunity to do so in the form of a *dybbuk*. It will leave once it has accomplished its goal, and sometimes with our help. The *dybbuk*, which enters a living person and attaches to his soul, often causes mental illness, talks through the person's mouth, and represents a separate and alien personality. The Catholic version you remember from the movie "The Exorcist."

And as in that movie, the remedy is a Jewish exorcism, performed by a rabbi who has mastered *Kabbalah*. The ceremony requires a *minyan*/quorum of 10 people who gather in a circle around the possessed person. The group recites Psalm 91 three times, and the rabbi blows a shofar. One Rabbi Gershon Winkler, who's written extensively on such things and claims he's performed four exorcisms himself said, "We blow the ram's horn in a certain way, with certain notes, in effect to shatter the body, so to speak. So that the soul who is possessing will be shaken loose. After it has been shaken loose, we can begin to communicate with it and ask it what it is here for. We can pray for it and do a ceremony for it to enable it to feel safe and finished so that it can leave the person's body."

Encounters with evil spirits were apparently a rare occurrence in talmudic and even medieval literature. It was not until 18<sup>th</sup> C that they entered our culture and community with any prominence. Beliefs that had been around since the 1600's in non-Jewish culture combined with developing principles of *Kabbalah*, eventually producing detailed rules for the exorcism of Jewish "evil spirits". The point of the Jewish exorcism is to heal both the person being possessed and the spirit doing the possessing. This is, by the way, in stark contrast to the Catholic exorcism that sought to drive away the offending spirit or demon.

Hebrew and Yiddish literature has many stories of these spirits (some written as autobiographies), and the testimonies of the rabbi's who exorcised them. There have been many presentations of *dybbuk* stories in music and literature, on the stage and on film. The classic is the modern text of *Der Dybbuk*, a Yiddish play written in 1916, and which has inspired many theatrical and musical treatments. A Yiddish film version of the play was made in Poland in 1938 (and is occasionally shown at film festivals), and a Hebrew version from Israel was produced in 1968.

While the *dybbuk* is usually described as a male demon-spirit, we do have our very own female demon whose name is Lilith. Perhaps as interesting as is her role in Jewish lore and legend, is the path by which she came to Judaism. The word *lilit* occurs in only one place in Hebrew Scripture, Isaiah 34:14. We read there "The wild beasts of the desert shall meet with the jackals; and the goat-demons shall cry to each other; and the lilit also shall repose there, and find for herself a place of rest." Whatever is this "lilit" from the Book of Isaiah, she's in the company of wild beasts, jackals, and goat-demons.

Most likely, we appropriated *lilit* from Assyrian demonology which describes *Lilitu* or *Lilu*, as a she-demon who attacks men and babies, who haunts houses because she has no bed of her own. There is apparently also a connection with the Sumerian spirit called *Lil*, meaning 'wind,' and also with the Hebrew word *lailah*, or 'night'. I suspect that all three are combined in our stories of Lilith, which warn us that at night she steals infants from their parents by sucking the wind/the breath of babies. Jealous of women because she has no man and no bed of her own, she takes from them what is most precious. Whatever the meaning of the *lilit* in the book

of Isaiah, she does acquire a specific history and description by the 6<sup>th</sup> C., where Jewish texts in Persia identify her as Adam's first wife. Those stories remind us that in the Creation story of Genesis 1, God makes both man and woman, simultaneously, on the 6<sup>th</sup> day. But then in Genesis chapter 2, the man is created singly, alone, and only afterward does God create Eve from Adam's side. The rabbinic texts ask: "what happened to the woman who was created with the man in the chapter before?" Their answer is Lilith. In that 6<sup>th</sup> C text we read in part:

No sooner was she created than she commenced arguing with Adam and saying, 'I am just as good as you are, as we both have been created at the same time and from the same earth.' When Lilith saw that she could not overcome Adam, she uttered the ineffable [four letter] name of God and flew up in the air.

Not willing to subordinate herself to Adam, Lilith left him. In need of a proper partner who would know her place, God made Eve from his side, as described in Chapter 2. So Lilith, angry that Adam would not let her be his equal, has sought vengeance on men and their wives ever since by taking away their newborn babies in the middle of the night. She also causes men to have nocturnal emissions in their sleep, and women to miscarry. Since the 6<sup>th</sup> C, Jewish communities have promoted amulets to ward off Lilith: hung over the baby's crib or worn as a necklace, and developed rituals to confuse her or prevent her from harming us.

Though our ancient tradition seems to have borrowed the name from early Mesopotamian traditions, Lilith as we've known her since the 6<sup>th</sup> C, is thoroughly Jewish. And in the 1970's she emerged as a heroine of Jewish feminists who saw in her powerful presence as the equal of Adam, a literary role model of women's independence. One of my rabbinic colleagues [Deborah Prinz *CCAR Journal*, Summer '97] wrote

This long-lived and resilient Lilith has been used by our tradition to set boundaries where chaos might otherwise threaten home, family, and sexual norms. In a very powerful way, Lilith menaced that which was most intimate. Because she came to represent ultimate freedom of movement and behavior, and because some part of her spiritual capacity enabled her to invoke God's ineffable name, [protecting ourselves against] her promised an orderly [and] safe... Jewish community.

And it wouldn't be a Jewish Halloween without the story of the "Golem," the clay monster created by the chief rabbi of Prague in the 17<sup>th</sup> C to protect his Jewish community. The word *golem* appears only once in the Bible [Psalm 139:16]: "Your eyes saw my unformed substance (*golmi*); and in your book all things were written..." In Talmud Adam is called a *golem*, until God fills him with breath.

In the well-known legend of the Golem created by Rabbi Judah Loew of Prague, a giant clay golem was brought to life to serve and protect the Jewish community—and it did, until it ran amok, and endangered even the Jews. According to one version of the story, it was when Rabbi Loew carved the 3-letter word *emet* (truth) into the forehead of his formed figure, and recited certain kabbalistic incantations, that the golem came alive, a sort of Frankenstein-in-clay. And when it became necessary to stop the golem from terrorizing the countryside, Rabbi Loew scratched out the first letter, the *aleph*, leaving only the letters *mem-taf*, reading *met* which means "death," and the Golem collapsed and broke.

There has been interest in the *golem* legend among writers, artists, and musicians for many generations, but especially in the early 20th century. Two early works on the subject were published in Austria and Germany in 1900 and 1908 respectively. *Der Golem* by Gustav Meyrink was published in 1915, and translated into English in 1928. It became a German silent film in 1920, with a later French version in 1936. It was the subject of Joseph Achron's *Golem Suite* for orchestra, written in 1932, and it became a ballet produced in Vienna in 1962.

Between *dybbuks*, Lilith and the Golem, our Jewish tradition has its own special place in the world of ghosts, goblins and witches. Interestingly, Jews have always been thought to be masters of magic and adept at sorcery. From the days of medieval Europe, it was "known" that Jews could tap into the power of satanic sorcery – for how else to explain our success in the world and our persistent survival despite our rejection of Jesus as Messiah?! Since God's power and protection was obviously refused us, our strength and longevity could only be attributed to our alliance with Satan. Thus it was common to stone Jews as sorcerers and witches.

And finally, connecting "All Hallows Eve" and Medieval Jewish literature, we read that spirits gather nightly by the light of the moon, conversing with one another and pursuing their Torah studies, very much as they did in this life. Occasionally, our texts tell us, a spirit council is called to adjudge disputes between the

latest arrivals and older members of the company. This is done most often on a New Moon, but more generally they congregate at night in prayer meetings, when they pray for the well-being of the living. Some nights they gather in the synagogue, where, clothed in ghostly prayer-shawls, they conduct their own spirit service. Once a man who fell asleep in a synagogue and was locked in by the *shammash*/caretaker. He awoke to find himself in the midst of such a spirit congregation. To his amazement he discerned the forms of two men who were still among the living. Sure enough, within a few days these two died! Thus arose the custom, in Eastern Europe, that one should knock on the synagogue door in the morning before entering. That way the spirit worshipers would be warned that it was time to leave.

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