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מרכז ואחריות

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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

BLITHE SPIRIT

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Once upon a time there was a chasid who changed the text of a Mishnah. Where the text of Pirkei Avot 2:4 is "Do not have faith in yourself until the day of your death", he recited "until the day of your old age", and commented "Such as me" (meaning that he had reached old age). Forthwith a spirit came and tested him . . . Immediately he had regrets. The spirit said to him: "Don't be in distress – I am only a spirit". He went off and recited the Mishnah with the same text as his peers. (Yerushalmi Shabbat 1:3)

Popular retellings of this story, as reported by the commentary Alei Tamar, differ as to the cause of the chasid's distress. In some versions he actually succumbs to the succubus; in some he flirts verbally with her, but does no wrong action; and in still others he merely has a momentary thought of succumbing.

On Bavli Kiddushin 81a, the story appears to be a twice-told tale.

Rabbi Meir would mock transgressors. One day the Satan appeared to him as a woman on the far side of a river. There was no ferry, so he grabbed onto a rope that was strung from one bank to the other and began crossing. When he was halfway across, he let him be. He said to him: "Had it not been decreed in Heaven 'Be cautious with Rabbi Meir and his Torah', I would have made you worth two nickels'.

Rabbi Akiva would mock transgressors. One day the Satan appeared to him as a woman atop a date tree. He grabbed the tree and began climbing. When he was halfway up, he let him be. He said to him: "Had it not been decreed in Heaven 'Be cautious with Rabbi Akiva and his Torah', I would have made you worth two nickels"

Putting the Bavli stories together with the Yerushalmi tempts us to assign them the common moral that no one should mock sexual sinners. But I am not prepared to surrender more than halfway to that temptation.

Let us begin by cataloguing differences. The Yerushalmi story is about a chasid, a man known for piety rather than for brilliance. The man's spiritual self-confidence is based not on accomplishment but rather on decay. The temptress spirit is not described as Satanic, and she apparently makes a free choice to leave the chasid be.

We might say that she does him a favor. Several very pious but very aged men, now of blessed memory, frequently told me that a man with no yetzer hora also has no joy in living. The chasid's "Such as me" may reflect depression rather than ego, a sense of being as-good-as dead (*chashuv k'meit*). The encounter recalls him to life. Indeed, it ends with her telling him he need not worry about consequences for his soul, as she is not a real woman.

Contrast this with Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Meir. Their spiritual confidence is founded on the belief that mastery of Torah leads inevitably to self-mastery. They have faith in themselves even while in full possession of their physical powers. They fall for the (male) Satan himself in drag, a double illusion. Unlike the chasid, they lack the internal resources or self-awareness to stop their actions, or even to regret them. The Satan let them go only under duress, and seeks to humiliate them while doing so.

Subsequent halakhists – including very recent and important decisors – wonder whether such a positive reading of the chasid is viable. Are sexual fantasies not sinful? What about the prohibition against wasting seed? Perhaps the spirit intended to do the chasid a favor, but accidentally or deliberately misrepresented the halakhah in her consolation?

When the conversation turns to women and incubi, different and more ineluctably practical questions arise. Do we treat sex with spirits as pure fantasy? For example: If an unmarried woman succumbs to an incubus, may she marry a kohen thereafter? If a

married woman succumbs to an incubus, may she return to her husband? How should we react to a confession of infidelity that simultaneously claims that the paramour was a demon? What if the demon/dybbuk had taken possession of a physical male body? Are the children of an ensuing pregnancy legitimate or mamzerim?

All this material is collected by Rav Ovadiah Yosef in Yabia Omer 9EH:16. Rav Ovadiah's historical survey indicates that previous halakhists were often unaware of key precedents in the rishonim and lacked access to versions of the story found in midrashim.

However, I have seen in Or Zarua Hagadol 124 that he wrote:

"Lo tin'af (Do not commit adultery) etc. – that one must not commit niuf whether by hand or foot, but with spirits there is no issue of niuf,

as they say in Midrash Tanchuma on the verse "This is the book of the descendants of Adam", that all those years (that Adam separated from Chavah in the aftermath of their expulsion from Eden) the (female) spirits would come to him and be aroused by him and give birth to demons etc.

And also from that incident that happened to one chasid, that a demoness appeared to him in the image of a woman and seduced him and he coupled with her – and it was Yom Kippur! and that chasid was deeply grieved by the matter, until Eliyahu came to him and said to him: "You are exempt, as she was only a demoness", and his mind was calmed.

Now were he liable (in the manner of a forbidden sexual act), Eliyahu would not have appeared to him and spoken with him and exempted him. Rather, you learn from here that it is not like zenut and one is exempt."

I have also seen in Bereshit Rabbah of Rabbi Mosheh haDarshan that he brings this story in the following words:

A story about a chasid who was contesting the words of the Sages who taught: Do not have faith in yourself until the day of your death" etc. Once he left the synagogue. It was Yom Kippur, and he entered his yard to relieve himself. The Holy Blessed One send him a spirit who appeared to him as an adorned

young woman of incomparable beauty. He said to her: "Be persuaded by me!". She replied: "But it is Yom Kippur!" "I am a married woman!". He said to her: "I accept upon myself the entire sin. He did not move from there until she was intimate with him. He went and fell into a heavy illness as the result of his great distress at having such a sin happen to him, until the Holy Blessed One saw his distress, so that the spirit came before him and said: "Rebbe, I am the woman who was intimate with you, and I am a spirit and not a woman, and I have come to inform you that you should recant and recite as do your colleagues: Do not have faith in yourself until the day of your death". He was happy and recanted and recited as did his colleagues.

In these versions, there is no question that the intimacy was consummated, and there is also no question that the consolation is authentic and reliable. Unlike in the Yerushalmi, every effort is made to accentuate rather than mitigate the chasid's potential guilt. He is not elderly, and the story takes place on a day that even marital intimacy is forbidden. There is no way to claim that the chasid gains any benefit other than spiritual humility.

Near the end of this responsum, which is uncharacteristically short and lacking a practical bottom line, Rav Ovadiah cites Rabbi Yosef Zechariah Stern (late 19th century) as protesting that on these grounds one could permit an extramaritally pregnant wife to her husband if she claimed that the father was a demon, and that as for the Yerushalmi and the Tanchuma – one cannot learn halakhah from aggadot! Rav Ovadiah comments that Rabbi Stern's arguments are not compelling. It seems that Rav Yosef is prepared to exonerate pregnant adulteresses if they plausibly claim to have consorted only with demons.

We have come a long way from a morality tale about not mocking sinners. Our story takes place in "the middle ground between light and shadow, between science and superstition, between the pit of man's fears and the summit of his knowledge." But can we derive halakhah from events in the Twilight Zone?