

The old yeshivishe joke has it that demons, like the fairy Tinker Bell, exist when and only when people – or specifically the greatest rabbis – believe in them. So demons existed in Talmudic times, but vanished in the face of Maimonides, only to be resurrected by the Vilna Gaon (according to Mitnagdim) or the Baal Shem Tov (according to Chassidim).

This joke to some extent derives from a statement on Pesachim 110b about at least some aspects of demonology:

כללא דמילתא:
כל דקפיד - קפדי בהדיה,
ודלא קפיד - לא קפדי בהדיה.
ומיהו למיחש מיבעי.

The principle of the matter is:

Anyone who is concerned – demons are concerned about him;
and anyone who is not concerned – demons are not concerned about him.
But one is required to be cautious¹.

Rashbam explains that demons must have *some* power even over the unconcerned – which means that they must have some objective reality – or else Chazal would simply have commanded us not to believe in them, and thus eliminated any risk from them. But one can easily respond that Chazal knew that not everyone would disbelieve on command.

Both the joke and the Talmudic statement express similar ambivalences. The Talmudic statement expresses a decent concern for conventional wisdom; the joke is nervous about attributing error to the great.

The joke, conveniently, does not take any position as to whether demons exist in our day – that would presumably depend on what the great rabbis of our day believe, and in turn, on whom we identify as such. The question for Modern Orthodoxy is: Can we give Torah authority to rabbis who believe in attributing physical effects to demonic causes, or does that create too great a gulf of sensibility?

Now past belief in demons did not stem from ignorance or a rejection of empiricism, nor does a contemporary belief in demons necessarily stem from such. But whereas in the past demonology was a socially respectable pursuit, today it requires a willingness to step wholly away from the accepted epistemologies of modernity, and to have standards for intellectual elegance that are alien to the intellectual establishment of the West today. That willingness to step away, when done consciously and with due intellectual rigor, should probably engender respect. But it is very difficult to give it authority.

¹ I don't have the resources this week to check adequately the textual provenance and reception history of this statement. I suspect, though, that the ending caution may not have been original, and frequently drops off in citation.

I was accused of heresy by a charedi rabbi some years ago because I expressed disbelief in sheidim, and he was not fully mollified when I showed him that I was only following Rambam. I think his confidence to some extent stemmed from his assumption that the Talmud agreed with him, although we've already seen how uncertain that is.

But the key to the issue is really this week's parshah – how does one understand the capacity of the Egyptian magicians to mimic some but not all of Mosheh's miracles? Why is it lice that finally stymies them?

Talmud Sanhedrin 67b records the explanation offered by Rabbi Eliezer: "From here we learn that demons cannot create beings smaller than a barleycorn". Rav Pappa in response swears that they can create nothing! But they can herd large animals, whereas (according to Rashi on the Talmud) lice simply can't travel great distances. (Note that in the next paragraph Rav Chiyya tells Rav that a superficially convincing magical camel resurrection was mere optical illusion, *achizat eynayim*.)

Rashi on Chumash cites Rabbi Eliezer without comment. Chizkuni, however, suggests that they would have been able – only there was no dust left untransformed in Egypt. But this raises another possibility – perhaps what the Egyptians failed at was removing the lice, rather than adding to them, since that would have been pointless.

And removing lice, unlike producing them – can be deliberately accomplished by purely natural means. This is the opening that Malbim seizes, as part of his general thesis that the Egyptian magicians, like Rav's resurrectionist, engaged primarily in *achizat eynayim*, and had not supernatural powers².

This is, I think, the clear Modern Orthodox way to read the story. It does not require, and should not entail, disrespecting Rashi. Nor, I think, does it destabilize the legal precedents Rashi set – at least those not directly related - as we can properly feel that they were set by a sensibility like ours, living in different circumstances.

Shabbat shalom

² This is also the position taken by Steven Spielberg in *Prince of Egypt*, whose magicians literally use smoke and mirrors.