

Spirit possession: Jews don't do that, do they?

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This paper looks at the question whether Jews 'do' spirit possession.

My understanding is that many contemporary western Jews regard spirit possession as an old-time phenomenon from the *shtetl* (Jewish village and small town communities in Europe up to WW II), something primitive, beyond which we have now moved. So – Jews don't do spirit possession now - or do they?

Yes, sometimes they do. This paper looks at spirit possession and spirit communication among Jews in different times and places, giving some attention to the social, historical and cultural factors supporting different kinds of spiritual experience.

***Dybbukim* and other malign spirit visitors – only in the past?**

A *dybbuk* is the wandering spirit of a deceased person, who has been unable to enter purgatory or paradise. The *dybbuk* usually enters a low-status member of Eastern-European Jewish society; women and children being most commonly possessed. The spirit is usually very badly-behaved, notably accusing respected members of the community of embarrassing sexual sins.

The phenomenon was reported from the 16th -19th centuries, and disappeared in the early 20th Century¹. At about the period when *dybbuk* possession became less common, the *dybbuk* theme was often deployed in literature and on the stage – the most famous examples are Ansky's *Dybbuk*, and Bashevis Singer's *The Slave*.

Here is an example of *dybbuk* possession: A Jewish woman in eighteenth-century Poland was possessed by a "Baal Dovor" (demon) which spoke from her throat in Polish (not her first language), causing great physical pain. It would not allow her to pray, study sacred texts or otherwise use holy words (i.e. liturgical Hebrew), would not let her go to the synagogue, and created a shameful disturbance on the Day of Atonement when she did try to go to the synagogue. Three exorcisms by eminent rabbis were carried out. One rabbi gave her an amulet to wear. The first two exorcisms were only partially successful and the spirit returned. The final episode was not a typical exorcism. The victim signalled for the lamps to be lit, complaining that she must be great sinner to have such suffering. A third voice - not that of the victim or of the spirit - was heard, which sounded disembodied. Witnesses recognised the voice as that of a famous rabbi who had died some years previously. The voice said that the woman was a

righteous, saintly individual, that she would get better, and would bear a son. She did get better and bear a son².

Another *dybbuk* was alleged to possess Eidel, the favoured daughter of the Hasidic leader (Rebbe) Rabbi Sholom Rokach of Belz (late C19th). Heartbroken when his beloved wife died, he raised Eidel as a boy, training her in male practices such as Talmudic study and *tefillin* (phylacteries), even though he had sons. When he died, his role taken by his son Rabbi Yehoshua, as was common practice. Eidel also became a Rebbe (Admor) – a not unknown practice - and tolerated by the rabbinic establishment: (Female admorim spoke from behind a mechitzah or screen and were generally modest). Eidel's wisdom and erudition were admired, and some of her father's followers became her followers (hasidim) rather than her brother's. While there is no record of Eidel claiming to be possessed by her father's spirit, there is a record of her exorcism by her brother, the Rebbe (sibling rivalry has been suggested³). At first the voice of R Shalom (emerging from Eidel) accused R Yehoshua of embarrassing sins, and he retreated, embarrassed, but eventually he identified the *dybbuk* as an imposter and succeeded in performing the exorcism. Following this, Eidel collapsed and never recovered her sanity: from the evidence available, she was apparently severely depressed^{3,4}.

Criteria for *Dybbuk* possession^{2,5}

A *dybbuk* is the soul of a deceased person which has entered another person **prior** to heavenly judgment of the soul. (Possession by a soul **after** its judgment is said to be a *gilgul* (reincarnation) and involves a complete "takeover").

- Both the *dybbuk* and the victim remain conscious and co-exist in the same body.
- The victim is typically distressed.
- The victim is more likely to be female than male, while the *dybbuk* is more likely to be male than female.
- Special means are necessary to expel the *dybbuk*.

Features which may be present (and not generally typical of Dissociative Identity Disorder or DID):

- The quality of the victim's voice is changed ("strange, high-pitched tone").
- Speech may not be accompanied by movements of lips or tongue.
- Knowledge of events very unlikely to be accessible to the victim.
- A mobile bulge, anywhere in the victim's body.
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While *dybbuk* possession may be viewed as a form of dissociative disorder, the state differs from DID in several respects. Apart from those mentioned above, the key feature of *dybbuk* possession is that there are normally only just two persona, whereas DID typically usually involves several or many sub-personalities, often with the number increasing over time.

Dybbuk became one of many derogated “primitive beliefs”, and malign spirits are not now reported among western Jews. It has been suggested that “the extreme passivity of the possessed in *dybbuk* cases was a convenient guise for rebellious acting-out, amply manifested in the aggressive, sexual and grotesque behaviour of the spirits”¹. The *dybbuk* has also been described as a “culture-bound syndrome, viewed as a working alliance between society and a selected group of deviants”⁶.

Contemporary spirits

Before going further, note here the anthropological distinction between possession and non-possession trances; it has been suggested that these are characteristic different forms of social organization, and notably that possession states occur in societies with more complex, hierarchical forms of social organisation^{7,8}. It has also been suggested that both possession and non-possession states may be malign or benign. The material considered in this article is probably in accordance with both suggestions.

Dybbukim are apparently no longer likely to visit members of Jewish communities, but spirit visitors, past and present, have often been described.

Zar: Benign or malign?

Zar is regarded as a culture-bound possession syndrome^{9,10}. *Zar* involves spirit possession and is widespread in the eastern Mediterranean, including *Etiopim* (Ethiopian Jews), some now living in Israel where it has become a matter of psychiatric interest and concern. *Zar* is not popularly regarded by Ethiopians as matter for as much psychiatric concern as depression. However, in Western eyes, *Zar* is often seen as a psychiatric or neurological disorder. It involves belief that the individual has been possessed by a spirit. There may be apathy, convulsive movements, mutism, obscene or unintelligible language^{9,10}.

It is interesting that the Ethiopian immigrants expected *Zar* to disappear in Israel, but did not. However, gender preferences shifted: from being apparently non-sexist, *Zar* is now mostly reported among women¹¹.

Beliefs about the nature of *Zar* indicate that this is a different type of spirit from *dybbuk*. Of Eve’s 30 children, the 15 most beautiful were made invisible and hidden, and condemned to remain invisible for eternity. A descendant of these invisible children is a *Zar*. The presence of *Zar* is diagnosed following lethargy, headaches, infertility and other symptoms not curable by doctors and healers. The individual is then initiated into a group of others who have *Zar*; the *Zar* reveals its identity and co-operative co-existence often develops. The *Zar* dance/ceremony is said not to be exorcism but a way in which the *Zar* can be summoned, through trance, and its identity and wishes revealed, Then the *Zar* and host can co-exist comfortably¹¹.

Jnun (demons)

Jnun have been reported among Tunisian immigrants to Israel, causing mental or physical illness. These are exorcised in *stambali*, a ritual trance-dance musical ceremony. Traditionally, the purpose is the exorcism of *jnun*, but people also join a *Stambali* for the promotion of well-being. Participants are encouraged to dance to exhaustion. The ceremony is performed only by, and for, women¹²:

“When people hear that a *Stambali* is being organised, they come for the release, each with her own issues. Nobody talks about what bothers her, each one is with herself, they don't talk with each other...every participant knows what it is she wants to be released from “¹² .

Other contemporary malign spirits

In Israel, in addition to *Zar* and *Jnun*, spirit possession and spirit influences are reported among Jews of non-Western origins. The effects are sometimes malign.

A married man with from Iran, with three children, became impotent several days after his father's death. He refused psychotherapy and asked for a medicine that would bring back his potency. Conventional pharmacological and behaviour therapy did not help. He left treatment because he did not believe anything could help him. Later the patient reported having improved following a dream whose content he would not reveal. The therapists consulted an Iranian colleague who suggested that the patient might believe that he had been “bound” by his vengeful deceased father as a punishment for failing to observe the religious laws of mourning properly , and who then unbound him in the dream, one year after the father's death (when the prescribed mourning period was finished). Binding (of the male organ) is a practice known to Christians, Muslims and Jews in Iran, involving witchcraft or sorcery. It prevents male fertility. The therapist subsequently discussed this possibility tactfully with the patient, who said that now he felt the therapist understood him ¹³ .

Benign spirit possession

Such visits are sought and/or welcomed. It has been suggested that these are non-possession trances, as compared with the visits of malign spirits⁷. The best-known is the *Magid* (soul/angel/spirit) who reveals holy matters, often mystical, to a holy person (almost invariably male, and scholarly). Visits by *Magidim* were reported during the same period as *Dybbukim*. One of the most famous was the *Magid* of Joseph Caro (1488-1575), author of the *Code of Jewish Law (Shulchan Oruch)* and other scholarly works. Caro was also a Kabbalist. He chronicled the visits of the *Magid* in a well-known work, *Magid Mesharim*. This work consists of notes on the *Magid's* sayings of which only a very small proportion were recorded. The *Magid* tells Karo to be very modest, to be devout in prayer, and always gentle and patient. There is major stress on asceticism. For example Karo

is often severely rebuked for taking more than one glass of wine, for eating meat, and even (as below) drinking much water.

Here is the translation of a sample passage (with thanks to Naftali Loewenthal):

He (the Magid) also said “Don’t afflict yourself. However, as much as possible, don’t drink a lot of water. Even though all the time you are cleaving to my Torah “I am Hashem (G-d) who is healing you” – by drinking a lot of water you are feeding the evil desire”.

More contemporary Jewish spirits?

The author has observed that:

- In the UK, several mental health practitioners with Jewish clients were asked about the current situation. No cases of spirit/*dybbuk* possession were reported i.e. of people speaking in other voices, behaving as if possessed.
- One client believes he is spoken to by a prophet, and others have paranoid beliefs of a spiritual nature.
- One rabbi, now deceased, was said to have performed exorcisms, but his family say they know nothing of this.
- One (psychologically well) individual recovering from a disabling physical illness reported experiencing states in which angels speak encouraging messages, saying that recovery will happen. This appears to offer and reinforce hope.

Although it has been hard to find reports of possession states among contemporary western Jews, spiritual practices are widespread, including graveside visits involving communication with spirits of the deceased. Spiritual coping practices among Jews in Israel, the USA, the UK and other European countries include:

- Visits to the graves of holy people (*Tzadikim*), parents and others, and other sites, notably the Western Wall of the former temple in Jerusalem. Prayers and/or psalms may be said, and written messages left. With graveside visits, the spirit of the holy person is said to be particularly accessible.
- The recital of psalms (*tehilim*). This is often done by groups of people in cases of serious illness or other serious difficulties
- Other practices such as prayer, the donation of charity

The Western Wall in Jerusalem: notes in all the accessible crevices



Notes left at the graves of holy men and women (this example is from Eastern Europe; there are also popular graves in Israel, the US and elsewhere).



Some conclusions and questions

On this fragmentary evidence, it seems that forms of possession and relations with spirits are linked with culture, gender, social status. Malign spirit possession may relate to low social status/powerlessness. Contemporary Western Jews are not possessed, but contemporary oriental Jews (Sefardim) can be possessed.

Benign possession has been distinguished from malign possession, and has been regarded as a non-possession trance state. Benign spirits are reported among Jews of high status, and may occur in contemporary Western Jewry. They are not normally regarded as psychopathological.

Spirit possession raises a number of diagnostic and treatment issues, and we might ask whether the diagnoses offered for (malign) possession states among Jews and others are helpful. In what ways is it useful to regard possession as a form of dissociative disorder, hysterical psychosis or paranoia? As transcultural psychiatrists lean towards the use of the idioms and treatments of other cultures in attempting therapy, studies of the methods and efficacy of alternative, “folk” treatments are needed.

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