

Midterm Paper: “The *Hakham* and the *Tam*” and “The Man Who Married a She-Demon”

Although Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav wrote his tale of “The *Hakham* and the *Tam*” about three hundred years after the creation of the anonymous story of “The Man Who Married a She-Demon,” both works may be said to serve as the same sort of cautionary tale about the vulnerability of the intellectual to demonic forces. In each of these narratives, a figure noted for his status as an intellectual becomes vulnerable to dark forces especially as a result of his overconfidence in—and his penchant for making some display of—what he regards as his own superlative abilities in the area of logic or reasoning.

The three-time groom in “The Man Who Married a She-Demon” is identified as the son of one Rabbi Zalmen, who “headed a large yeshiva attended by a hundred distinguished students, who pored over the holy books day and night.” The narrator immediately continues by adding that “Rabbi Zalmen had an only son, likewise distinguished, who also studied at the yeshiva” (118). This “distinguished” status is further corroborated even “later, when the rabbi’s son became an adult,” by which time “his learning was renowned far and wide” (118-119). Even during his childhood, this rabbi’s son openly displays confidence in his own powers of logical deduction to a degree which is consistent with his “distinguished” reputation as a budding rabbinic scholar. Significantly, it is precisely this aspect of the boy’s character that contributes to his vulnerability to a she-demon; this fact becomes apparent when he becomes “it” in a game of “hide-and-seek” (118):

Eventually he found everybody except for a boy named Anshel.... Soon [the rabbi’s son] came to a hollow tree, and when he saw an arm sticking out, he figured it must belong to Anshel, who was evidently hidden inside the tree. The rabbi’s son shouted: “Anshel, c’mon out, I’ve found you.” But he saw that the hand did not retreat. So the rabbi’s son removed a gold ring from his finger,

slipped it over a finger on the hand looming from the tree, and said: “Since you won’t come out of the tree, I hereby wed thee.” He played this prank because he thought that the hand belonged to his friend Anshel. (119)

In the mind of this “distinguished” rabbi’s son, the appropriate method for deducing that the anonymous arm is Anshel’s seems no less elementary than a straightforward process of elimination: “he found everybody except for a boy named Anshel,” so naturally “he figured” that the arm “must belong to Anshel” (118-119). The young scholar’s notable overconfidence in his own reasoning ability is underscored even on a linguistic level: the rabbi’s son immediately “*figured it must* belong to Anshel, who was *evidently* hidden inside the tree” (119; emphasis added).

The rabbi’s son is so overconfident in his own interpretation of what he sees that he utterly fails to consider a major flaw in his reaction to the presence of the “arm sticking out” of the tree: through his own independent logic—which is, at root, based upon the unimaginative assumption that the owner of the arm must be someone that the rabbi’s son himself knows about—he decides that the arm belongs to Anshel, without ever even attempting to consider any other possibility (119). The young scholar is too overconfident with his own powers of deduction to even entertain the notion that the arm might belong to someone other than Anshel; rather, he peremptorily accepts his own initial interpretation of what he sees, despite the fact that it is ultimately rooted in an assumption—a logical flaw which his overconfidence prevents him from acknowledging.

It is in yet another action that bespeaks his confidence with his own intellectual ability that the rabbi’s son recites the marriage formula and enacts the ritualized bestowal of a matrimonial ring. Although it is intended in jest, this act presents an opportunity for the child scholar to display his knowledge of the procedure for bringing a marriage into effect—something

which he may be presumed to have learned about even at a young age in his father's yeshiva. It is precisely because of the serious nature of the marriage procedure that its injection into what he perceives to be a thoroughly unserious context can be regarded as a source of humor. In other words, the humorousness that the rabbi's son perceives in his own intended "prank" is based precisely upon the seriousness of his erudition in sophisticated matters—a rabbinical skill set which bestows upon him the ability to effect a legal marriage (119). Indeed, he later remarks, "At that time *I married a demon* because I thought it was the boy I was looking for"; this phrasing emphasizes how very real this marriage is (123; emphasis added). It is because of his overconfidence in his own knowledge, as well as his performative urge to exhibit a self-entertaining display of his own legalistic erudition, that the rabbi's son renders himself vulnerable to the she-demon, who takes the marriage entirely seriously.

Significantly, it is precisely where the rabbi's son missteps that the poor bride succeeds. While the former character's absence of doubt in his own deductive skills precipitates a failure to imagine that the mysterious arm might really belong to someone other than Anshel, the poor bride actually exercises enough imagination to envision a fictional scenario that would enable her to survive where her two murdered predecessors had failed—namely, a scenario in which she is ignorant to the fact that her husband has "lost two wives" (122). After Rabbi Zalmen's wife declares in the presence of the poor bride and her mother, "You've probably heard what's happened to our son twice," the poor bride's mother says, "Dear daughter, you've heard what the wealthy rebbetsin has said" (121). It is even after this conversation that the poor bride responds to the she-demon's remonstrance—"You brazen hussy, I've already killed two girls who lay with my husband! *You've heard about that* yet you're risking your own life! So I'm going to kill you

too!”—by feigning complete ignorance to that crucial fact which the she-demon accuses her of knowing: “I’ve never heard that he lost two wives” (122; emphasis added).

While the rabbi’s son exhibits an absence of doubt in his own capacity to deduce the truth—and then proceeds to enact a display of his own traditional legal erudition, which further contributes to his vulnerability to the she-demon—the poor bride actually steps outside the bounds of conventional ethics by intentionally uttering a complete untruth, thereby enabling herself to take a first step toward defeating the she-demon. While her husband had acted out of overconfidence in his ability to grasp the truth through his reason alone, her strategy involves an unhesitating abandonment of truth and of its pursuit through unaided reason. While the rabbi’s son deduces what he concludes “must” be the truth based only upon what he concludes “must” be a sufficient quantity of facts, his wife takes an entirely different route: she simply imagines a convenient falsehood, disregarding a crucial fact along the way (119). While he assumes he knows the truth, she knowingly mangles the truth. Furthermore, while her husband had been filled with unjustified but unmitigated certainty in his grasp of the truth—“he figured [the arm] *must* belong to Anshel, who was *evidently* hidden inside the tree”—she readily acknowledges her own uncertainty about an enterprise whose ultimate outcome, she admits, remains unknown to her: “I’ll risk my life and marry his son” (119, emphasis added; 121). These divergences between the rabbi’s son and his poor bride further underscore how the former character’s unwavering confidence in his own personal reasoning skills plays a significant role in rendering him vulnerable to the demonic forces against whom she actually succeeds where all others had failed.

About three hundred years after this story was penned, Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav created a demonically-inflected tale featuring yet another conspicuously intellectual figure whose

overconfidence in his own deductive abilities once again leads to his fall into the hands of dark forces. In “The *Hakham* and the *Tam*,” the former title character harbors not a trace of doubt about the quality of his own deductive skills; it is this overconfidence which ultimately renders him vulnerable to the devil. Not unlike the “distinguished” young scholar in the earlier story—who concocts a “prank” through a display of his own erudition, and whose “learning” ultimately becomes “renowned far and wide”—the *hakham* similarly becomes associated with “grandeur and great wisdom,” and he never squanders an opportunity “to show off his wisdom and philosophy” (“She-Demon” 118-119; Nahman 148, 154). Like the rabbi’s son, the *hakham* is so overconfident in his own logical abilities that he sees no need to consider anything other than the conclusions that he reaches through his own unaided reasoning on the basis of whatever facts are accessible to him.

Indeed, the *hakham*’s intellectual behavior resembles that of the rabbi’s son in some strikingly significant ways. Near the end of Rabbi Nahman’s tale, the *hakham* is conversing with the *tam*—and, as usual, seizing the opportunity “to show off his wisdom”—when suddenly

someone came and said, “The *Azazel* (the devil) has sent for you.” And the *tam* was very very shocked....

And the *hakham* asked him: “Why were you so frightened?”

He told him: “Because of the devil who had sent for us.”

He laughed at him: “Do you believe that there is a devil?”

The *tam* asked him: “Who, then, sent for us?”

The *hakham* answered: “Surely, this is my brother who wanted to see me and sent for me in this disguise.” (159)

As in the case of the rabbi’s son, the extent of the *hakham*’s overconfidence is underscored even on a linguistic level, as he asserts, “*Surely, this is my brother* who wanted to see me and sent for me in this disguise”; in a similar tone of unmitigated certainty, he soon adds, “*Let me inform you* that I have a brother who is very angry with me, and *did this* to frighten me” (159; emphasis added). For the *hakham*, reaching the rock-solid deduction that the anonymous “someone” had

been sent by his brother is as simple as recalling the fact that he has “a brother who is very angry with” him and who has motive to “frighten” him—since, naturally, this brother must be the person who sent the threatening messenger (159). Just as the rabbi’s son relies in his reasoning solely upon the personally-known fact that Anshel is hiding somewhere in the vicinity, the *hakham* relies in his reasoning solely upon the personally-known fact that he has a brother who would want to “frighten” him; immediately satisfied with his own conclusion, the *hakham* sees no reason to give any consideration to the possibility that the devil even exists (159).

Like the rabbi’s son, the *hakham* is too confident in his own unaided interpretation of what he sees to even entertain the possibility of its inaccuracy. Just as the rabbi’s son is too overconfident with his own powers of deduction to even entertain the notion that the arm might belong to someone other than Anshel, the *hakham* is too overconfident with his reasoning abilities to even consider the idea that the messenger might have been sent by someone other than his brother; indeed, in a moment that is eerily reminiscent of the behavior of the rabbi’s son, the *hakham* peremptorily accepts his own initial interpretation of what he sees, despite the fact that it is, strictly speaking, predicated upon the unfounded assumption that the source of the messenger must be someone whose existence is known to him. Both the rabbi’s son and the *hakham* are utterly convinced that they possess all the knowledge they require to reach a sound logical conclusion. It is because of this overconfidence that the rabbi’s son senses none of the danger that exists in “marr[ying] the hand,” and that the *hakham* agrees to “go with” the devil’s messenger accompanied by “protection” that is sufficient only to guard against a mortal threat such as his brother (“She-Demon” 119; Nahman 159).

The purely independent—indeed, even solipsistic—nature of the *hakham*'s reasoning process is signaled even earlier in Rabbi Nahman's tale, where he instructs a tailor to make a garment

in the style he [the *hakham*] liked and knew. And the tailor tried to get it right and made the garment as he wished, but made a mistake with just one lapel, and did not get it right. And the *hakham* grieved very much because he knew for himself that it is considered beautiful here, because they do not understand it. "If I had been in Spain with this lapel, they would have laughed at me and I would have been ridiculous." (150)

The essence of the *hakham*'s overconfidence in his independent intellectual ability is elegantly encapsulated here in the words "because he knew for himself" (150). Even in his encounter with the anonymous messenger, the *hakham* decides solely through his own unaided reasoning—which is, at root, based upon the unimaginative assumption that the messenger must have been sent by someone of whose existence "he knew for himself"—that the messenger has been sent by his brother—of whose existence "he knew for himself"—without ever even attempting to imagine any other possibility (119).

Thus we may discern some parallel patterns between the respective experiences of the conspicuously intellectual characters in "The Man Who Married a She-Demon" and "The *Hakham* and the *Tam*"; within the sphere of these parallels, we may gain a keener appreciation of the harmful role that is played in both stories by these characters' overconfidence in the area of logic or reasoning.