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SPIRIT  
POSSESSION  
IN JUDAISM

Cases and Contexts from the  
Middle Ages to the Present

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and an introduction by

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21. The notion that the *golem* concept is to be found in ancient Judaism is erroneous. Scholem believed that a hint of such a possibility can be found in the ancient *Sefer Yetzirah* is unacceptable. The phrase near the end of the book, "and he [Abraham] was successful" cannot be an indication for this. The narratives in BT Sanhedrin (65b) about Rava, Rabbi Hoshai, and Rabbi Hanina refer to a different concept: the scientific quest for creating living things, which preoccupied several scientists in the Greco-Roman world. See Gershom Scholem, "The Idea of the Golem," in idem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism* (New York: Schocken, 1965), 165–67; and, following him, M. Idel, *Golem* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990); See also P. Schaefer's convincing analysis, "The Magic of the Golem: The Early Development of the Golem Legend," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 36 (1995): 261ff.; J. Dan, *The Unique Cherub Circle* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1999), 31–38.

22. Rosenberg published his *Nifle'ot Maharal* in Lemberg in 1909. Scholem assembled the various legends that preceded Rosenberg and then described the book as "not popular legends but tendentious modern fiction." See Scholem, "The Idea of the Golem," 198–204, esp. 203, n. 1.

23. On the doctrine of the *tzaddik*, see Rivkah Shatz-Uffenheimer, *Hasidism as Mysticism: Quietistic Elements in Eighteenth Century Hasidic Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 272–77 and passim; and see the next note.

24. Rivkah Shatz, "The Doctrine of the *Tzaddik* in Rabbi Elimelekh of Lyzhansk" (in Hebrew), *Molad* 18 (1960): 365–78; Rachel Elior, "Between *Yesh* and *Ayin*: The Doctrine of the *Tzaddik* in the Works of Jacob Isaac, the Seer of Lublin," in *Jewish History: Essays in Honour of Chimen Abramsky*, ed. Ada Rapoport-Albert and Steven J. Zipperstein (London: Peter Halban, 1988), 393–455; David Assaf, *The Way of Kingship: Rabbi Israel of Rizhin* (Jerusalem: Merkaz Shazar, 1997; in Hebrew); and J. Dan, *Messianism in Modern Judaism* (Tel Aviv: MOD, 1999; in Hebrew), 150–203.

## The Taming of the Deviants and Beyond: An Analysis of *Dybbuk* Possession and Exorcism in Judaism

YORAM BILU

Documented cases of *dybbuk*<sup>1</sup> possession appear in Jewish sources from the sixteenth century A.D. to the first decades of the twentieth century. Since these sources have usually been inaccessible to the general scholar, this uniquely Jewish variant of spirit possession has been largely the subject of literary rather than scientific investigation. Ansky<sup>2</sup> and Singer<sup>3</sup> popularized the *dybbuk* phenomenon by emphasizing its colorful and dramatic nature; Ansky's play *The Dybbuk* (subtitled *Between Two Worlds*) was the first to be preformed by the Hebrew National Theater and had widespread success. Recently, a scholar of Judaic studies collected and annotated what appears to be the vast majority of the reported cases of *dybbuk* possession.<sup>4</sup> Most of these reports are to be found in mystically oriented exegeses of the Holy Scriptures and in books of Hasidic tales, usually written to praise and commemorate a renowned rabbi or sage. Some cases are more detailed and were published in special brochures or booklets, the titles of which attest to their dramatic quality, for example, "Awful Tales," "Terrible Deeds of the Spirit." These provocative titles had their effect—the brochures were published in numerous editions.

In this essay I shall attempt to clarify the *dybbuk* phenomenon in terms of some of its psychocultural components. My study is based on an analysis of sixty-three documented cases over the nearly four-hundred-year span in which *dybbuk* possession thrived in various parts of the Jewish world. Most of the cases seem to be authentic, located as they are in known coordinates of time and space. The reports were usually written by eyewitnesses, some of whom actively participated in the expulsion of the *dybbuk*; many of the victims and exorcists were identified by name, and in some instances the documents were signed by distinguished witnesses testifying to their accuracy. As ethnographic accounts, however, these reports leave much to be desired. Laconic and obscure on some points, overly elaborated

the twentieth century in Lithuania, Palestine (Jaffa and Jerusalem), and Baghdad. Whereas the timing of the onset of *dybbuk* possession has not been fully explained, its disappearance was apparently related to the gradual disintegration of Jewish traditional centers in Europe as a consequence of modernization and emigration, and finally their physical extermination during the Holocaust. The mass emigration of Jews from the Moslem orbit to modern Israel brought an end to possession in those areas as well.

Despite the vast cultural differences between East and West in Judaism, all the communities in which *dybbuk* possession appeared shared a common tradition with a "complex of commandments which governed the day to day discipline of the Jew, his piety, his morals, his rules for personal life at home, in the synagogue and in the market place."<sup>10</sup> Indeed, it might be argued in somewhat tautological fashion that the very appearance of *dybbuk* possession in these communities points to a certain degree of common mystically oriented understanding. Only a few reported cases emerged from a nonmystical matrix.<sup>11</sup>

In analyzing *dybbuk* possession, I have found it profitable, following Obeyesekere<sup>12</sup> and Crapanzano,<sup>13</sup> to conceive of it as an idiom for articulating and structuring certain inchoate experiences and events. An idiom, according to Crapanzano, "provides the basis for those schemata by which reality is interpreted."<sup>14</sup> An act of articulation separates events from the flow of experience and renders them meaningful. When these events are construed on a phenomenological level within a culturally shared idiom, the entire experience undergoes "symbolization."<sup>15</sup> "Chaos [is] fashioned into cosmos."<sup>16</sup> Borrowing Crapanzano's terms, I view the articulatory function of the *dybbuk* spirits as essentially "vectorial." That is, the spirits are a vehicle for articulating unacceptable, conflict-precipitating desires and demands. Since the idiom of possession is culturally constituted, this articulation may result in relief for the actor. He does not suffer "the consequences of his idiom" as a Western paranoid does (even while both are considered sick in their respective cultures).

Although I am concerned in this essay with both individual motivation and societal cultural constraints, my emphasis is on the latter—the collective (or control) level. This is partially due to the fact that I am dealing with written documents rather than with actual cases observed in vivo. Starting with the assumption that the desires and demands underlying *dybbuk* possession constituted a threatening challenge to the Jewish traditional way of life, I shall depict the impressive dialectical process by means of which deviance was transformed into a conformity-strengthening vehicle, a process involving three levels of control: (1) the articulation of unacceptable desires within the possession idiom, the tenor of which was set

by an externalized, ego-alien agent; (2) the rectification of individual deviance through the exorcism of the *dybbuk*; (3) the strengthening of conformity of the community by way of the moral implication of the *dybbuk* episodes.

In what follows, I shall analyze these three levels of control in detail, drawing on examples from the case reports. I shall then attempt to locate the possessed within a psychiatric diagnostic category in the light of their social roles in the cultural matrix from which the phenomenon emerged. Finally, some implications for the analysis of culture-specific syndromes will be discussed.

### First Level of Control: Outwardly Directed Cultural Molding of Aberrant Impulses

Through the *dybbuk* idiom forbidden wishes were articulated and symbolized in a way that considerably decreased their potential threat both to the individual and the community. From a psychodynamic point of view, this process can be formulated in terms of projection,<sup>17</sup> whereby repressed impulses found expression in an externalized (although internally located) entity—the possessing spirit. What were the cardinal impulses underlying the articulated scheme of the *dybbuk*? One need not be a devoted Freudian to single out sexual wishes as a major motivating force behind this type of possession. Open expressions of sexuality were strictly regulated and curtailed in Jewish traditional communities of former centuries,<sup>18</sup> leaving few nondeviant forms of expression (without resulting, however, in an overall devaluation of sexuality). Since a discussion of these regulations and prohibitions, relevant as it may be to an understanding of the cultural matrix from which the *dybbuk* phenomenon emerged, is beyond the scope of this essay, I shall focus here instead on the textual evidence of sexual themes in the documented cases.

### *Dybbuk Possession as an Articulation of Sexual Urges*

According to Crapanzano<sup>19</sup> and Spiro,<sup>20</sup> the elements in the idiom of spirit possession must constitute appropriate metaphorical representations of the impulses putatively underlying them—there must be some degree of congruence between symbol and referent. Such congruence is pronounced in the phenomenon under discussion, in that an act of penetration is essential both to *dybbuk* possession (and spirit possession in general) and sexual intercourse. So compelling is this congruence that the scholars who elaborated the theosophical doctrine underlying the *dybbuk* could not disregard

it. The first kabbalists linked transmigration specifically with sexual transgressions,<sup>21</sup> and in Jewish mystical texts the residence of a spirit in a human being was designated "impregnation" (*ibbur*).

The sexual meaning of penetration in spirit possession is even more accurately (and therefore more convincingly) conveyed when the genders of the dramatis personae, penetrator and penetrated, correspond with those in a standard heterosexual act. Hypothetically, since spirits and victims alike are unequivocally sex-typed, four gender combinations are possible. What is their distribution in the cases under discussion? The sample consists of forty-one female victims and twenty-two male victims. The ratio of almost two to one is consistent with massive evidence for the preponderance of women among the possessed in a greater variety of culturally unrelated social groups.<sup>22</sup> Explanations of this recurrent finding usually emphasize the culturally defined inequality of the female role in male-oriented societies,<sup>23</sup> which is also consistent with Jewish mystical traditions concerning spirit possession. The author of *'Emek Hamelech* (The Valley of the King), a kabbalistic text, argues that women were excessively vulnerable to possession because "the impurity stemming from the serpent still abounds in them." Here an allusion is made to Eve's primordial sin of succumbing to the temptation of the snake, the nature of which temptation was blatantly sexual, according to mystically oriented sources.<sup>24</sup> In another text, *Minbat Eliahu* (The Gift of Elijah), the relative immunity of men to possession is attributed to the fact that "a man cannot refrain from the sin of nocturnal pollution, out of which demons are engendered; these creatures always encircle him, so how can [the possessing spirit] enter him?" Male sexuality procreates demons that haunt wandering human spirits and dispel them. This cosmological proposition, which is verified by many *dybbukim* in the recitations of their ordeals, is based on a conception of male sexuality as outer-oriented, rendering men relatively immune to penetration, in contrast to women, who are relatively accessible to penetration because their sexuality is inner-oriented, a point to which I shall return below.

The gender distribution of the spirits is even more one-sided. Fifty-eight of the spirits (92 percent) were male; only five of the spirits (6 percent) were female. As a result, the most prevalent gender combination in the sample is that of a male spirit with a female human (thirty-six cases). This too is a recurrent finding cross-culturally.<sup>25</sup> Second in frequency is the male-male combination (twenty-two cases). Significantly, all five female spirits penetrated women. Hence, most of the *dybbukim* comply with the heterosexual or, less frequently, the male homosexual metaphors; female spirits rarely assume the role of a possessing agent, but when they

do the idiom is exclusively female homosexuality. The penetration of a male human by a female spirit, which is the least plausible alternative as long as sexuality is the guiding metaphor, is left an empty category, even though it is hypothetically feasible. It should be noted that female-in-male possession is not *universally* an empty category. In various forms of socially approved ceremonial (institutionalized) possession, as in Afro-American religions<sup>26</sup> and North African Muslim cults,<sup>27</sup> the pattern is quite common. The difference apparently lies in the moral dimension, as to whether the possessing entity is positively or negatively evaluated. When the possession is positively or ambivalently valued, female-in-male possession can occur because the possessed-to-be is alleged to "open" himself up to it. The prevailing images in these cases are of sexual seduction and willing consent, tending sometimes to lasting romantic alliances and marriage. When the possessing agent is negatively evaluated, so that possession is considered an illness rather than a sought-for religious accomplishment, the implicit sexual image is of rape rather than of consensual indulgence. And whereas males can rape females or other males, females cannot rape males. Indeed, the self-reports of some female victims in the samplings include descriptions of experiences that closely resemble rape. An eleven-year-old girl from nineteenth-century Jerusalem described a violent struggle in which "I stumbled, I was pushed, then I had to lie down and was turned over." A seventeen-year-old adolescent girl in Baghdad at the turn of the century experienced "something like a big cat [that] fell on my hips, in between the shoulders, stretching me in order to force its way into me." Both victims were virgins, for whom the metaphor of possession-as-rape seems particularly applicable, since penetration is difficult both physically and, given the premarriage moral purity accorded to females, mentally.<sup>28</sup>

Unlike the organ of departure, which toward the climax of the exorcistic ritual is stereotypically located by the exorcist in one of the toes, the penetrated organ is seldom described. When it is mentioned, it is most frequently the vagina (four cases, each of the victims married women). The evasive, reluctant language used in these cases (for example, "it is disgraceful to say") suggests that other such penetrations were left unreported. The only case that involved penetration through the anus was of a male spirit taking possession of a male adolescent. The selection of these erogenous zones further implicates the sexual meaning of *dybbuk* possession.

Generally speaking, *dybbuk* possession is a drama of the young. When the victim's age is explicitly indicated (in about 20 percent of the cases), it does not exceed thirty-five. When age is not specified, age-linked status categories of the victims, which appear in most of the case reports,

included “babies,”<sup>29</sup> “children,” “girls,” “virgins,” “young men,” and “women.” No mention is made of older adults. Female victims in the sample were predominantly newly married young women. In sum, the sample reveals the victims’ ages to be those at which sexuality emerges as a potent drive. The spirits, although older than their victims in most cases, were originally those of people who died quite young. The few cases of possession by an elderly man’s spirit clearly represent a different, more positively valued type of possession. These spirits belonged to righteous people who required only minor rehabilitation. They utilized the possession episode to deliver reproachful messages to the community and were willing to depart peacefully once their mission was completed.

The sample also reveals that male victims were generally younger than female victims. About 75 percent of the former were less than twenty years old, as opposed to 49 percent of the latter. Among the female victims the largest subcategory was of “women,” a term usually used for married women, whereas only two male victims were explicitly described as married. Of these, one was a young religious scholar from Mogalnitza, Poland, who was possessed eight weeks after marriage, the other—a borderline case of *dybbuk* possession—also a religious scholar, from nineteenth-century Jerusalem, obsessively haunted by the spirit of a Christian minister without being unequivocally possessed by it. Thus, women were liable to possession over a relatively wide age range, particularly after being married. Indeed, in those cases where the penetrated organ of the female victim was mentioned, the site of entry was further specified as the “opening” of the vagina, normally formed during the wedding night and symbolic of the consummation of sexuality. In a case report from nineteenth-century Stolovitsch, Poland, entitled “A Terrible Happening” (*Ma’aseh Nora’ah*),<sup>30</sup> the spirit explicitly states that “as long as she [the victim] is a virgin, we are forbidden to approach her, but when she is married, then we shall have our share too.” In contrast, the marriage of a man afforded him a kind of prophylaxis, a relative immunity to *dybbukim*. Thus, the emergence of sexuality and the consummation of the sexual act have different meanings for the sexes vis-à-vis the *dybbuk* phenomenon: whereas consummation for the male turns him into a penetrator, thereby rendering him almost impenetrable, the female, by having been sexually “opened” and penetrated, becomes all the more accessible to penetration. These meanings correspond, of course, with transcultural images of male and female sexuality<sup>31</sup> and are implicit in the kabbalistic texts I cited above.

The sexual implications of the *dybbuk* phenomenon, as “emically” reflected in the motivations of the possessing spirits, are represented throughout the case reports. A gentle spirit from seventeenth-century

Cairo “entered a woman for his passion.” Other spirits described the possession by using the verbs “to come to” and “to know,” which in biblical Hebrew were euphemisms for sexual relations. One of the aforementioned Stolovitsch spirits testified that “he never touched [the girl] as a husband does.” The most lucid and elaborated example is a turn-of-the-century Baghdad mystical text. The author gives instructions for identifying male-in-female possession with reference to the following conditions: “If she sees in her dream a man standing against her, or lying with her; or inflaming her heart with the passion of intercourse; or rubbing her genitalia or anus . . . or preventing her from having sex with her husband in order not to be sexually penetrated by him.” It is hard to imagine a more straightforward exposition of the sexual wishes attributed to the spirit. Assuming that those sexual proclivities represented the repressed sexual fantasies of the possessed, the thin, almost nonexistent cover of the disguise is surprising. In all likelihood, the motivations expressed did not have to undergo desexualization because the externally located idiom of the *dybbuk* rendered their manifestation safe. In other words, the centrifugal (inner to outer) transformational disguise, rooted as it was in a sociocultural construction of reality, was so effective as to make any *content* transformation superfluous. The sexual motivations underlying *dybbuk* possession can be examined more specifically as reflected in the *sins* of both participants in the possession episode. That the victims’ wrongdoings, considered the precipitating factor for possession, were nevertheless laconically portrayed is not surprising, in that these were the only behavioral aspects of the case from which the possessed was deemed responsible—the only ones that did not fall under the idiomatic cover of the *dybbuk*. The sexual transgressions of the victims, if mentioned at all, seem mild, even negligible, when compared to those of the possessing spirits. Against a background of expressions of libidinal desires by the victims rarely going beyond a caress, a kiss, or obscene utterances, the accounts of the scandalous misconduct of the spirits during their human lifetimes represent, from a psychodynamic point of view, acting out in fantasy of the most forbidden repressed (or suppressed) sexual urges. To illustrate the spirits’ uninhibited sexual profligacy, I should like to return to the Baghdad corpus of cases, which provide the most detailed and colorful descriptions of Jewish possession. The misconduct of a spirit possessing his own sister is described as follows: “He was tender of age but a veteran in vices and wickedness as a hundred-year-old. Very handsome was he, and the generals loved him, because he was ready to satisfy their desires, as well as those of their wives, and he took his hire from both sides. Some prostitutes would solicit him to do with them whatever he craved, from whichever side he preferred, any time he

wanted, even during their menstruation period." It was no wonder, then, that "since he is long experienced in adultery and prostitution, he cannot calm down even now [after death, being a spirit] and he lies with his sister whenever he desires." In another Baghdad case, a person was possessed by Shabbatai Zvi, the notorious false Messiah of the seventeenth century. It is significant that the major sins for which he became a wandering spirit involved promiscuous sexual misconduct. He admitted that he had sinned with Gentile and menstruous women as well as with prostitutes, that he had committed adultery, that he encouraged a young disciple of his to have sex with his wife, and that he had practiced sodomy wrapped with his prayer shawl and phylacteries. These cases were, indeed, the most extreme examples of sexual misconduct, but many other spirits, particularly in the first documented cases of the sixteenth century, were characterized as lecherous profligates. Some of them were specifically identified as pimps and rapists. It seems that the most dark, unutterable desires were projected onto the spirits, thereby gaining cathartic outlet.

Another socially accepted channel supplied by the *dybbuk* idiom for the verbal expression of sexual wishes derived from the special ontological status of the spirits, which afforded them extraordinary skills of divination. These skills were employed to unravel cosmological aspects of the afterlife, foretell future events, and expose and denounce hidden sinners in the community. The spirits' revelations, particularly in the last regard, were saturated with sexual content. From the sixteenth century on, possessing spirits identified adulterers and homosexuals among the observers and generally criticized the growing sexual permissiveness of the community: "in our time, half of the women are disloyal to their husbands," complained a Baghdad spirit. This preoccupation with sexual matters, presented as virtuous reproach, constituted another socially acceptable outlet for forbidden wishes.

The acting out of sexual urges within the *dybbuk* idiom was not limited to the fantasy level. As in other cultural variants of possession, uncontrollable ecstatic behaviors, sometimes mimicking the violent convulsions of epileptic seizures, were prevalent in *dybbuk* cases. The rhythmical fits resembled the grand paroxysms of *hysteria major* of the nineteenth century, so minutely described by Charcot and others.<sup>32</sup> Whereas in ceremonial possession "ecstatic possession seizures were sometimes explicitly interpreted as acts of mystical sexual intercourse between the subject and his . . . possessing spirits,"<sup>33</sup> this interpretation was never made in *dybbuk* reports. In some early, prototypical cases, however, the sexual connotations of paroxysmic behavior are implied in the texts. For example, a spirit in a woman from Safed in the sixteenth century indicated his readiness to

depart through the big toe "by bringing her [the victim's] feet up and down in successive movement, time after time, and with these violent movements her gown fell from her feet and thighs so that she was contemptibly exposed." By itself, this description might seem an insufficient basis for interpreting the seizures as a simulation of intercourse, but in this case the spirit had penetrated through the victim's vagina, and when asked by the rabbis if he did not fear her husband's wrath, insolently replied: "Not at all! Since her husband is not here but in Saloniki." Psychodynamically, then, this might have been a well-organized sexual fantasy, of which fits were an integral part. Another early case involved the spirit of an Italian shepherd, a Gentile, who took possession of a twenty-five-year-old woman "when her husband . . . had to go." Here also the woman was penetrated through the vagina, at night. She was depicted as lying breathless, open-mouthed in her bed, "all her organs . . . in agony and . . . shaking forcefully and jerking as if fever-stricken."

The heterosexual aspects of *dybbuk* possession were thus revealed through the constructed idiom of a male spirit penetrating a female human, providing various paths for the expression of sexually loaded content on the verbal and psychomotor levels. The victim's overt prepossession behavior—his moral transgressions, left uncovered by the idiomatic shield—gave only a scant indication of the contained sexuality.

Showing the same correspondence of sexual patterns and gender combination, descriptions of male-in-male possession—which constitute about a third of the sample—disclose homosexual themes with varying degrees of explicitness. (The penetration of the spirit itself can of course be viewed as homosexually motivated.) The town of Nikolsburg, in Moravia, provided two classic *dybbuk* cases in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In one case, after the spirit had been exorcised, he presented himself to his victim and "held his small finger, through which [he] had been expelled, and embraced him like a man fondling his friend's hand with affection and desire." In the other, according to a story in *Ma'aseh Buch* (in Yiddish, *The Book of Tales*), considered by some the first documented *dybbuk* case, the spirit that took possession of a young adult accused two of his friends of practicing homosexuality. To the astonishment of the crowd gathered around, both immediately admitted their sin. The aforementioned spirit of Shabbatai Zvi, whose most shocking transgression was self-portrayed as pederasty, took possession of a young Baghdad male in the beginning of the twentieth century. In another Baghdad male-in-male possession, the spirit confessed that "on the Holy Sabbath, he committed pederasty in the orchard of village B." The spirit was allowed to take possession of the victim because the latter, "when he was still a child, went

with his father to village B and entered the same orchard in which I committed my sin. There, on Sabbath, he had picked [a fruit] from the same tree under which I committed pederasty." When viewed psychodynamically, the sins of the spirit and his victim—picking a fruit on Saturday is a transgression of the Sabbath rest laws—fit neatly together to produce a coherent fantasy. Given the identical coordinates of time and space, the metaphor of plucking a forbidden fruit can be considered a very cogent symbolic substitute for the homosexual event. This correspondence might hint at a childhood recollection of an actual homosexual experience (under the same tree in the orchard of village B), barred from consciousness by attributing it projectively to the spirit and by translating it metaphorically into a desexualized equivalent.

An explicit association between male-in-male possession and homosexuality is revealed in the case from nineteenth-century Mogalnitza already cited. A few weeks after his marriage, a religious student fell into a severe depression following his harassment (but not yet possession) by a spirit. As later revealed by the young man, this was the spirit of a man who had attempted during his lifetime to molest him sexually. The sick student said he had not succumbed to the seduction, which he had promised to keep secret. Despite his promise, he revealed this intimate information to his rabbis during his illness, whereupon the spirit took possession of him. Assuming that the spirit possession represented the acting out in fantasy of a homosexual impulse, the timing of the episode is singularly significant. It might be speculated that the young groom was flooded with "homosexual panic" when he had to display heterosexual behavior incompatible with his homosexual proclivities. Wedding time was also a critical period—but now for a spirit's *departure*—in one of the rare cases of female-in-female possession from the Baghdad corpus. The victim was a seventeen-year-old fatherless girl brought up and surrounded by female figures. The possessing spirit, which had tenaciously endured the healer's persecution, eventually gave its promise to depart from the victim once she married, during the time of defloration. The idea, already cited above, that the spirit's entry and the husband's sexual penetration are mutually exclusive is presented here quite explicitly. (It is worth noting that in classical Greece marriage was a recommended cure for hysteria, which was allegedly caused by disordered sexuality—the product of a "wandering womb").<sup>34</sup>

A discussion of the sexual urges implicit in the *dybbuk* cases would be incomplete without a consideration of oedipal themes, which, according to Freud's classical analysis<sup>35</sup> of a case of demonic possession in the seventeenth century, may play a major role in the phenomenon. If one considers the possession agent to be a father image or representation, the male-in-

female form of *dybbuk* possession might reflect a symbolic realization of female oedipal desires toward the father. Since most of the case descriptions contain only skimpy and fragmented background information as to the spirit's characteristics, it is impossible to examine the father-as-spirit hypothesis except in its direct, undisguised manifestation—that in which the possessing agent was the spirit of the victim's father. Two of the thirty-six victims of male-in-female possession were possessed by their fathers, whereas none of the twenty-two male victims was thus possessed.

The first case, which I have already discussed in another context, involved a multiple possession of incestuous nature. First the spirit of the brother, whose sexual licentiousness in his lifetime was boundless, penetrated his sister, who explicitly experienced possession as a sexual assault or rape. The second possessing spirit was the father's, whose posthumous persecution was related to the fact that he has been tempted by a married woman to commit adultery. This sin, which caused his spirit to wander and seek refuge in his daughter's body, might very well have represented the girl's fantasy of tempting her father. The unexpected epilogue of this case report converges in an intriguing way with the ending of the original Oedipus myth: of the transmigration of the brother's spirit into the body of a newborn baby, it is said, "and he who is wise as the Blessed One to understand the meaning of things. For He plagued the boy with smallpox that maimed his face and blinded his two beautiful eyes . . . so that he would never be involved in pederasty nor in adultery." Nor in incest, one is tempted to add.

The second case, which involved a famous Hasidic rabbi and his beloved daughter in nineteenth-century Russia, is too complex to be represented in detail here.<sup>36</sup> The core of this tragic drama involved the rabbi's boundless love for his daughter Eidel, whom he preferred over his other children (boys included!), and his pathetic attempts to disregard or repair "Satan's mischievous interference that prevented her from being born a male." That he considered Eidel a boy was reflected in such extraordinary gestures as adorning her with male religious artifacts—specifically, his phylacteries.<sup>37</sup> In the light of this intimate relationship, colored moreover by the rabbi's loving but tragically short-lived relationship with his own mother, it is no wonder that Eidel could not accept the accession by inheritance of one of her brothers to the throne of the Hasidic court when their father passed away. The climax of the bitter struggle between two siblings came in an exorcistic ritual in which Eidel, possessed by a spirit who claimed to be her father (but considered an impostor by her adversaries), confronted the rabbi-exorcist, her brother. Under the shield of the *dybbuk*, she desperately fought to discredit her brother's moral authority. Eventu-

ally, however, her father's strong voice faded away and she was defeated. Following the exorcism, she lived in complete apathy, dissociated from her surroundings. Eidel's son, a famous rabbi in his own sake, was born blind! The oedipal theme, interwoven with such related themes as sibling rivalry and sex-role conflict, appears as a leitmotif of the plot, which is no less dramatic or bizarre than any by Singer.

#### *Nonsexual Aberrant Impulses Articulated within the Dybbuk Idiom*

The *dybbuk* idiom also served as a culturally molded outlet for nonsexual urges and desires whose expression was forbidden in Jewish communities. In fact, the emergence of such desires can partially be understood as a reaction to the strict, instinct-suppressing regulations governing all spheres of communal life, based as these were on rigid religious codes and prohibitions. Overt expressions of such desires would have undermined the very foundations of the Jewish way of life. As with sexuality, these urges received only minimal expression on the nonidiomatic (therefore undisguised) level of the victims' prepossession misconduct. The majority of their misdeeds were associated with such religious transgressions as not fulfilling one of the Sabbath duties, disregarding a prayer, or misusing a ritual artifact. Other, more serious, transgressions, usually committed by women, included doubting the validity of episodes of Jewish history (Exodus, for example) or diverting a spouse from religious studies to mundane affairs. But these appear negligible in comparison with the spirits' (nonsexual) sinfulness during their lifetimes. *Dybbukim* of this type make an impressive gallery of infamous characters—apostates who converted to Christianity, informers who handed Jews and their property over to Gentile authorities, robbers and thieves. Four of the *dybbukim*-to-be committed suicide—an inexpiable sin according to Jewish law—and five were notorious criminals and murderers of fellow Jews. Thus, a *dybbuk* from eighteenth-century Detmold, Germany, admitted that he had killed two Jews with his own hands and caused the death of three others. A female spirit who took possession of a girl in Radin, Lithuania, at the beginning of the twentieth century confessed that she had strangled two Jewish children. The first *dybbuk* from Nikolsburg, who was the head of a Jewish community in his home town, cold-bloodedly murdered two rabbis who reproached him for his bad manners. There was even a biblical murderer: a *dybbuk* from the shtetl of Koznitz identified himself as the man who had initiated the stoning of the prophet Zechariah.

The merging of these exemplars of uninhibited licentiousness (some of whom boasted that none of the 613 commandments regulating Jewish

life was observed by them) with their victims, modest sinners at worst, can be explicated within two frames of reference. From the perspective of *control*—essentially the perspective of the participants' conscious mind—the fact that a person drank without blessing was possessed by the spirit of an apostate constituted a warning signal indicating where ostensibly innocent negligence of commands might lead. The view that “one transgression brings on another” and “of one ill come many” was soberly acknowledged and gloomily repeated by Jewish rabbis. From a *psychodynamic* perspective on deviance, it might again be argued that the victim's humble sins were the visible part of a mental iceberg of darker, unutterable desires, which found idiomatic expression and metaphorical outlet in the profligate *dybbuk*. Apart from the reported sinfulness of the spirits, the behaviors of the victims while possessed—while presumably controlled by the spirits—cogently reflected the nature of these hidden subversive wishes. Not only did many of the victims actively avoid basic ritual duties, they made violent attempts to desecrate the most sacred symbols of the Jewish religion. When taken to the synagogue, for example, where many of these symbols were located, the possessed would jerk and contort violently, spit on holy books and artifacts, insult and physically attack the shocked worshippers. Obversely, they were irresistibly attracted to Christian sacred paraphernalia. Kissing the New Testament, “eating and praying as the Gentiles do,” and compulsively making the sign of the cross were repeated symptoms. It should be pointed out that most of these extreme antireligious behaviors were enacted by males, on whom rested the lion's share of the burden of Jewish commandments.

Whether or not these behaviors and underlying subversive wishes were specifically expressions of a yearning to be released from the cumbersome yoke of religious law, they would certainly have constituted a threatening challenge to the essence of the Jewish way of life had they not been attributed to an external agent. The fact that they, like aberrant sexual impulses and their associated behaviors, were culturally molded into the *dybbuk* idiom, substantially mitigating the harm done to the community, is what I mean by the “first level of control” in the process by which deviance was combated.

#### **Second Level of Control: Rectification of Deviance by Exorcism**

By enabling individuals to articulate forbidden inner urges through an externalized, ego-alien agent, the *dybbuk* idiom significantly decreased their destructive potential. As to the behavioral *manifestation* of deviance, how-



ever, the contrary was true. The fact that the evil spirit of an outstanding sinner was considered the motivating agent underlying the victim's behavior served to accentuate and dramatize the deviant nature of the possession episode: the possessed publicly engaged in the behavior that was considered blasphemous even to think about. The danger therefore existed that these behaviors might be added to the observers' repertoire. Through the *dybbuk*, the inexpressible became possible and real. In order to assure that the potential for such behavior was not actualized, the *dybbuk* had to be exorcised. Deviance had to be rectified. That this was, indeed, the ordinary consequence of the exorcistic ritual suggests that exorcism was a traditional and effective equivalent of individual psychotherapy.

As in other cultural variants of spirit possession wherein the invading agent was considered evil and the alliance with it forced and undesirable,<sup>38</sup> the exorcism of the *dybbuk* was understood to require the strict observance of a set sequence of steps, which perforce culminated in its expulsion.<sup>39</sup> Its uniquely Jewish, culture-bound aspects were prominently expressed in the therapeutic phase. The exorcist was a mystically oriented rabbi, whether a kabbalist or a Hasidic *tzaddik* (a pious, holy man). Often the exorcism was performed in the synagogue with the active participation of a *minyán* (a kind of religious quorum—a group of ten male adults without which public prayer could not take place). Jewish sacred paraphernalia were generally employed during the critical stages of the exorcism in order to facilitate the expulsion of the spirit.

Even though successful exorcism was the rule in cases of *dybbuk* possession, the rabbi-*dybbuk* encounter was usually depicted as a long, bitter, emotionally charged, and exhausting struggle. The healer had to mobilize all the stamina, sagacity, and resourcefulness at his disposal to overpower his insidious adversary, for whom, it should be recalled, the victim's body constituted a longed-for refuge from the incessant and merciless persecution of the vindictive angels of destruction.

The exorcistic ritual was performed in a fixed, graded order, with milder measures of verbal coaxing of the spirit giving way to adjurations and decrees of excommunication against it. Coercive methods of fumigating or beating the *dybbuk* were resorted to only after the aforementioned verbal alternatives had been exhausted. When a synagogue was the arena for the exorcistic ritual, its dramatic nature was particularly enhanced. In this public setting, the rabbi's performance was accompanied by an orchestrated set of activities performed by the audience. These included the taking out of the Torah scrolls from the ark, the blowing of ritual ram's horns, and the successive lighting and extinguishing of black candles. The quorum participated in special prayers and incantations. Sometimes the victim

was tied and laid down in front of the ark. The tension in the crowded synagogue (even non-Jews occasionally came to observe the extraordinary scene) mounted gradually with each step or "round" in the rabbi-*dybbuk* struggle until it exploded ecstatically with the spirit's forced exit.

The first step of the exorcistic ritual was aimed at ascertaining the authenticity of the case as one of *dybbuk* possession. This was particularly necessary when the spirit deliberately concealed his presence. In questionable cases, various indications were used as diagnostic criteria, such as speaking without moving the lips, the swelling of peripheral organs (for example, the neck or breasts), and bodily sensations of extra heaviness. Sometimes more sophisticated, quasi-medical examinations were made. For example, the exorcist might look for a particular pattern of pulse in the victim's forearm, indicative of the spirit. Once the differential diagnosis was completed, the healer turned to the second step, in which the spirit was identified and compelled to disclose background information concerning his transgressions, the circumstances of his death, and his vicissitudes between that event and the onset of possession. It was assumed that without communicating with the spirit and retrieving these identifying details, successful exorcism was not possible.<sup>40</sup> The *dybbuk's* recitations concerning his experiences as a wandering spirit were overwhelmingly impressive in their disclosure and detailed description of various aspects of Jewish cosmology. For the participants in the exorcistic ritual, this was a unique opportunity to witness "directly" an entity with special ontological status, reporting from the "other world" and specifying its nature.

Following the inquiry, a lengthy negotiation took place between the parties. The exorcist tried to gain the spirit's consent to free the victim or, at least, discuss the conditions for its departure. This was the most crucial phase in the ritual, the one that determined its consequence. Against the rabbi's resourceful application of exorcistic devices, the *dybbuk* assumed an obstinate position from the outset, disobeying the exorcist's commands, deriding and depreciating his authority, and occasionally attacking him physically. (More often the spirit directed his violence at the victim.) The spirit's insidiousness was particularly revealed in those instances where its readiness to depart was followed by a stubborn refusal. To counteract his adversary's deceitfulness, the rabbi would compel the spirit to pledge its readiness to leave with a public oath, sworn over a handkerchief to guarantee the departure.

For the *dybbuk* to be expelled, certain conditions had to be fulfilled. These usually involved activities aimed at redeeming the spirit from his liminal position. Whether they were requested by the spirit or initiated by the rabbi, these postexorcistic obligations were to be performed mainly by

the possessed. They included the observance of certain mourning rituals for the *dybbuk*, the donation of a meal for poor religious students, sacrificial slaughter, and the lighting of memorial candles. Sometimes the rabbi himself and other participants in the exorcistic ritual would promise to recite prayers for the *dybbuk*'s spiritual redemption. These activities were performed from one to twelve months after the exorcism. Their omission would render the formerly possessed victim liable to further assaults by the spirit.

A hot debate over the body site of the spirit's departure often terminated the negotiations phase. The *dybbuk* would try to transform his coming defeat into partial victory by causing major damage to the organ through which he departed. Stereotypically, his preferences, strongly opposed by the exorcist, were an eye, ear, mouth, or limbs. Departure through one of these might have rendered the victim blind, deaf, mute, lame, or paralyzed. Under the healer's pressure, the spirit agreed to leave through one of the fingers or, most often, one of the big toes, where its exit was not deemed hazardous.

The tension that accumulated during the various stages of the exorcistic ritual was climatically discharged with the *dybbuk*'s departure. Even though successful exorcisms were immediately reflected in the victim's regaining ordinary consciousness, additional signs were sought to validate the spirit's expulsion. Without them, no one could guarantee that the insidious *dybbuk* would not reenter its victim. A small scar on the big toe or a sharp pain in the toe, an exploding sound in the air or, most impressively, a broken window were frequent manifestations of the departure. In the case reports, this final stage of the exorcism was particularly overdramatized. For example, a *dybbuk* exorcised from a child in seventeenth-century Constantinople "shaked the house, and forced his way into a dish which he moved to and fro, downward and upward several times. . . . [then the spirit] violently rolled the dish away from the house and it fell upon a pitcher which was broken into pieces."

Following the exorcism, the formerly possessed, weak and exhausted, was carefully guarded against further assaults by the spirit. He was arrayed with amulets and encircled by religious students who recited prayers around him until he was altogether recovered from the possession episode.

Judging from the sample of reported cases, exorcism was highly efficacious psychotherapy. More than 90 percent of the possessed were completely, irreversibly cured. (The success rate in the general population might have been lower, of course, if failures were underrepresented in the written reports.) When failure was admitted, it was usually associated with the exorcist's shortcomings rather than with the incurable nature of

the disease. Thus, after two futile attempts to exorcise a *dybbuk*, a Hasidic rabbi from Lithuania candidly admitted that "I learnt that it is not my mission to exorcise spirits, therefore I stopped." It was probably his lack of assertiveness that underlay his failure, as implied in the *dybbuk*'s remark: "At first I feared him, but later on the situation was reversed, and he was afraid of me." Three cases of death following exorcism were attributed to the spirit's rancorous, ruthless revenge for having been expelled. The fact that all three were early-sixteenth-century cases might be taken as an indication of the novelty of the phenomenon, as evidenced by the difficulties in coping with it. The delicate relations between the dramatis personae in their complementary roles had yet to be settled and regulated.<sup>41</sup> Since it was mentioned more than once that a spirit would try to strangle its host, the possibility that asphyxiation by "overfumigation" was the cause of death seems reasonable.

The therapeutic effectiveness of *dybbuk* exorcism was revealed most strikingly in terms of the *contrasting effect* it produced. Typically, the symptom-free former victim displayed new, positively valued behaviors that had not been in his repertoire before the possession episode. This was particularly true in cases of extreme antireligious sentiments voiced by male victims, but it also held for profligate women tamed into penitence and strict observance of commands. Through the idiom of *dybbuk* exorcism, change could be formulated as an abrupt transformation whereby deviant identity was expunged and replaced by a positive conformist one. In the first case from Nikölsburg, for example, a male adolescent who could not pray for six years became, shortly after exorcism, "a new creature, a faithful observer of the commandments, blessed with good health, and erudite in the Torah." A child from nineteenth-century Pressburg who, during possession, used to tear Jewish sacred artifacts and kiss Christian holy books, became "a disciplined person who followed the right way all his life."

Thus, the exorcism of the *dybbuk* caused deviant behavior to be replaced by exemplary behavior. The rectification of individual deviance through exorcism, depicted here as a traditional (and more effective) equivalent of individual psychotherapy, represents the "second level of control" in the process I am describing.

### Third Level of Control: Strengthening of Conformity in the Community through the Dybbuk Episode

The implications of *dybbuk* possession and exorcism were too far-reaching to be exhausted by the aspect of individual control. A major difference be-

tween curing rituals in traditional societies and modern psychotherapies lies in the fact that the rectification of deviance in the former did not take place in a social vacuum.<sup>42</sup> It often had profound reverberations in the social world and contributed to its reorganization. In this manner, deviance was harnessed to enhance social control and conformity in the community.

The elaborate cultural processing of the *dybbuk* made it a powerful vehicle for enhancing obedience and discouraging deviance, largely by virtue of the multifaceted manifestation of the idea of *reward and punishment* expressed within the idiom. As an ideological doctrine, the principle of the transmigration of souls provided a solution to the question of the "ill-fated righteous," a problem of great significance in Jewish history, both in the individual and society. A present-day Hasidic book (*Shomer Emunim*), for example, contends that the victims of the Inquisition in Spain and Portugal were inhabited by the transmigrated souls of the First Temple Israelites, who had engaged in idolatry. By the same token, the persecution of Jews in czarist Russia was meant to rectify the evildoing that had precipitated the destruction of the Second Temple. Finally, the Holocaust is alluded to as the ultimate rectification!

The *dybbuk* idiom contained within it two levels of retribution. By attributing the penetration of the spirit to the host's past transgressions, moderate though they might have been, a clear principle of retribution was established, which contributed to social control. The second, more severe form of retribution was of course reserved for the *dybbuk* itself, brutally and multifariously punished for its sins, its suffering minutely described before the audience of the exorcistic ritual. These included both the quality of their deaths in this world and their sufferings in the hereafter. Thus, the majority of possessing spirits were originally persons who had died young, very often of unnatural causes. A few had committed suicide (in a case from seventeenth-century Constantinople, the spirit was identified as "a vicious apostate, involved in ugly affairs, who killed himself because he could not find rest from his wrongdoings"); others were hung, drowned, or massacred by Gentiles (the aforementioned *dybbuk* of Koznitz was the first to be killed by invading Babylonians). Some of the spirits reported particularly agonizing deaths. A vicious sorcerer whose spirit took possession of the girl in Stolovitsch died after he had fallen into the wheel of a grinding mill. His arms were mutilated and his back broken. The young Baghdadi whose spirit possessed his sister lost his foot while serving in the Turkish army during World War I: "So intense was his suffering that he was rolling on the ground forward and backward.<sup>43</sup> No remedy could cure him until gangrene inflicted upon him a bizarre death."

But it was the reported vicissitudes of the spirits in the hereafter that provided the most comprehensive and impressive accounts of retribution. It bears repeating, in this context, that these episodes offered a unique encounter between the living and the dead until then almost nonexistent in Judaism. The spirit's recitation was one of the high points in the exorcistic ritual precisely because it constituted dramatic and emotionally charged *evidential confirmation*<sup>44</sup> of metaphysical beliefs concerning the nature of the "other world." Jewish traditional cosmology was confronted, as it were, with empirical reality and translated into everyday language.

The spirits described their persecutions by angels of destruction and demons in such realistic detail as to make the mere thought of committing a sin frightening. In the early cases from the Mediterranean area, for example, they were reported to be hit with sticks of fire, "each blow caus[ing] them unparalleled agony, just like that of a living person whose flesh is cut, little by little, with a knife until he passes away." A spirit from the shtetl of Korets was torn from its body by the angels of destruction, to be successively swallowed and spit out by demons; then it was ground in a mill and had to transmigrate into a pig and other animals. The Baghdad cases from the turn of the century again supply the most detailed descriptions. The spirit of Shabbatai Zvi, for example, was beaten in his tomb for twelve years. Afterwards he was transmigrated into a wild animal, "and every Friday, from two o'clock to half past four in the afternoon, he was condemned to a cell of boiling excrement." Another spirit was flogged by thirty-five angels of destruction fifteen hours a day, "and the remaining nine hours I had to spend in a desolate desert full of snakes and scorpions that bit and ate my flesh for four years." The spirit of an adulterous woman from Baghdad gave the most detailed account of her postmortem punishments. At first she was beaten incessantly with sticks of fire for three days. Then she had to stand trial before the grand jury in Heaven. Upon refusing to answer the charges, she was beaten until she dissolved into ashes. Her sentence was to be handed over to the vindictive angels for a hundred years in punishment for a hundred incidents of adultery. The latter flogged her twenty-seven times a day and seventeen times each night, the sum, forty-four, equaling the numerical value of the Hebrew word for blood, (*dam*), to remind her that she did not cease her sexual misconduct even during her menstrual period. In addition, she had to chop trees each night to fuel a furnace on which she was burnt for three hours in front of the celestial jury. Only on Saturdays could she rest, though chained and imprisoned; spirits who had desecrated the Sabbath were persecuted on Saturdays as well.

The credibility of the accounts was enhanced by the realistic quality of the spirits' descriptions of the "other world." The garments of its inhabi-

tants, the structure of the Heavenly Court (including exact measurements of the rooms in which it was located), even the form of certain sections of Hell, into which some spirits were allowed temporary entrance, were portrayed in detail. All this information supplied a convincing context for conveying the idea that in the coming world, regulated by principles of reward and punishment, the righteous were prosperous and the wicked doomed. It is hardly surprising, indeed, that some exorcists could not let this rare opportunity pass without seeking to elicit information concerning matters unrelated to the exorcism itself. In some reports, intellectually curious rabbis sought from the *dybbuk* an elucidation of the laws of the universe. In one of the Baghdad cases, for example, the exorcist asked the spirit: "Tell me whether the sun rolls upon heaven like a ball, or does it break its way through it, or does it pass underneath, in the air of this world." Sometimes the spirits were employed to solve such unsettled cosmological issues as this: "Since it is known that in heaven night is no less bright than day, is there any difference between the two and how can the sunrise be recognized?"

The impact of the spirits' recitations was all the greater when the setting of the exorcism was public. Aware of the effect of the formidable spectacle, some of the exorcists spared no effort to increase the size of their audience. Thus, a nineteenth-century Hasidic rabbi, who originally thought to exorcise the *dybbuk* with only the participation of a quorum, changed his mind and decided to make the exorcism public "so that many people would observe and repent." The same reason underlay another exorcist's command that the *dybbuk* confess in front of an audience, even though his sins had already been recited privately. It seems evident that a major motivation for writing and publishing *dybbuk* episodes was the need to promulgate their moral lesson. Although the proliferation of brochures and pamphlets dealing with *dybbukim* was partially due to their dramatic plots, in which dreadful adventures, suffering and agony, sex and violence, relief and salvation, on both real and celestial levels, all played a part, the published accounts also served as an important means of indoctrination and strengthening community conformity. In most of the publications, the latter tendency was clearly indicated as, for example, in one of the first documented cases from Safed: "It is important for them [the audience] to subdue their hearts before heaven, and to fear doomsday, since everything is taken into account, and there is no refuge in *Sheol* [the underworld]."

Apart from testifying to their tantalizing sufferings, the *dybbukim* also served as direct agents of social control by exposing sinners in the audience and by demanding stricter observance of the commandments. All these activities, embedded within the dramatic, sometimes shocking spectacle

of the exorcism, electrified the observers and produced immediate effects. An early report from Safed ends: "many people were present, all of them weeping, as the fear of doomsday fell upon them; and the whole country was strongly moved." In an Italian case of the seventeenth century, the spirit exposed the sins of people in the community, whereupon "all of them whole-heartedly repented, having learned that the spirit revealed their most profound secrets." A hundred years later, in Nikolsburg, an eyewitness reported that "the extent of penitence, experienced by the large crowd, was inconceivable." In fact, deep sentiments of compunction and repentance as aftereffects of exorcism were reported in most of the cases. In some of the accounts, even non-Jews were moved to repent.

In this way, the circle was closed. Symptoms representing aberrant wishes that, if directly expressed, would have damaged the foundations of Jewish life, were transformed into a conformity-enhancing device. This dialectical transformation could only have happened, moreover, in close-knit, traditional communities, which monitored and governed the entire living environment of each of their members. In my concluding remarks, I shall elaborate on this functionalist argument at some length.

In addition to expressing the principle of reward and punishment, the *dybbuk* idiom served as a means of validating the status and enhancing the sociopolitical prestige of certain individuals. The moral authority of the rabbi-exorcists, in particular, was indisputably confirmed by the fact that the spirits eventually acknowledged their authority and submitted to it. Sometimes it was hinted that this acknowledgment was based on information that the spirit had gathered in Heaven. The spiritual ascendancy of well-known Hasidic rabbis was convincingly confirmed by the spirits even when those rabbis were not involved in their exorcism. Thus, a *dybbuk* from Peelts in Poland complained that ever since a certain Hasidic rabbi had passed away *dybbuk* cases had multiplied, implying that only the late rabbi could redeem the spirits. A temporary exit from the girl he had possessed was explained by this spirit as a desperate attempt to gain salvation on the rabbi's tomb. This attempt failed when thousands of souls assembled in the cemetery for the same purpose, and he could not get through. The manipulative use of *dybbuk* cases to enhance status was particularly evident in the context of power struggles between individuals, groups, or sects. Rabbi Hayyim Vital, a renowned student of Rabbi Isaac Luria Ashkenazi (the founder of a major tradition of Kabbalah in sixteenth-century Safed), was assisted by a *dybbuk* in Damascus in his bitter struggles with other mystically oriented rabbis, the spirit denouncing his foes while praising and exalting Rabbi Hayyim. Delicate status ratings were construed out of the differential skillfulness of rabbi-exorcists. In one Hasidic source, for

example, it was contended that the Belzer rabbi could exorcise spirits only in the vicinity of his hometown, and that his exorcistic interventions took several weeks. The rabbi from Rozin, in contrast, had no geographical limits to his exorcistic skill, nor had he to spend more than a few hours to expel a spirit. The superiority of the latter was thus displayed. The bitter conflicts between Hasidism and their opponents (*Mitnagedim*) found expression in *dybbuk* cases when spirits of persons who had insulted Hasidic rabbis described their consequential sufferings and repented their sins.<sup>45</sup> In the struggles over control within Hasidic courts, *dybbuk* cases were again manipulatively exploited, as reflected in the aforementioned case of Eidel, who roundly criticized her brother, the leader of a Hasidic sect, under the cover of *dybbuk* possession.

Ultimately, the validation of the moral ascendancy of religious leaders through the *dybbuk* idiom contributed to social control: the rabbi, more than any other figure, served to maintain the Jewish identity of his community. Moreover, the exorcistic ritual reinforced traditional status rankings based on age and sex variables. The rabbi-exorcists, males by definition, were typically middle-aged or old. The possessed, mostly females, were usually quite young. The exorcistic ritual constituted a conservative mechanism that facilitated the perpetuation of the traditional status hierarchy in the community.

### Conclusions: Dybbuk Possession as a Culture-Specific Syndrome

My analysis of *dybbuk* possession and exorcism, with its healing, functionalistic, control-oriented emphasis, obviously needs to be qualified. The conditions must be specified under which deviance may undergo a transformation such that it enhances conformity. By elucidating and circumscribing these conditions, moreover, in the dialectical process by means of which personally and socially disruptive experiences were harnessed to contribute to the maintenance of the social order, some insight may be gained into the nature and limits of "culture-specific syndromes." Since the process necessarily involves an elaborate, coordinated interplay between individuals and societal institutions, the analysis should encompass both levels. Specifically, the recruitment into the *social role* of the possessed, with its culturally prescribed role definitions and script, should be explicated.

With regard to the societal level, I have already emphasized that the *dybbuk* phenomenon appeared in close-knit, traditional communities that exerted extensive control over their members. This would appear to be a

necessary condition for the success of a deviance-transforming idiom. The fact that deviants could be so smoothly tamed reflects a major dimension of this control. With regard to the individual level, I have argued, in line with general psychodynamic reasoning, that the enactment of the role of the possessed served to express and partially gratify urges otherwise unfulfilled. Even beyond the articulation of forbidden impulses within a culturally constituted and socially accepted idiom, however, the possessed—precisely because of their suffering—enjoyed considerable secondary gain. Some of the *dybbuk* victims shrewdly exploited their conditions to become the focus of general attention, to elicit sentiments of respect, pity, and awe, and to be pampered and cared for. So conspicuous was this secondary gain that in some cases people were reported consciously simulating *dybbuk* possession in order to gain material rewards and sympathy from onlookers.

So much for the *motivation* of individuals to enter the role of the possessed. But a crucial selection factor in the enactment of any social role concerns the *ability* or *skill* to generate the socially prescribed behaviors involved in that role.<sup>46</sup> Since the *dybbuk* role embodied a complicated set of behaviors, culturally defined and constrained (and compellingly conditioned by the complementary role of the exorcist), its enactment called for certain assets that only a select group of "deviants" possessed. Thus, it is highly unlikely that the severely disturbed (that is, psychotics) could comply with the elaborate behavioral specifications and constraints of the *dybbuk* role. (Recall the highly structured stages of the exorcism.) In the Hobbesian (or Freudian) sense of a constant battle between individual impulses and societal control, the *dybbuk* epoch clearly represented the triumph of society. But the triumphant endeavor itself was limited to those individuals who were willing and able to articulate their aberrant wishes and inner conflicts within the *dybbuk* idiom. Even in Jewish traditional communities, where conformity to sociocultural dicta was powerfully enforced, only *some* deviants could be tamed so effectively.

Who were those willing and able individuals? According to contemporary psychiatric diagnostic systems, most of them would probably be labeled "hysterics." But hysteria, as Krohn puts it,<sup>47</sup> is an "elusive category" given the multitude of contexts in which it has been applied and of meanings ascribed to it. In his insightful effort to elucidate and decipher the core dynamics underlying hysterical variants across time and cultures, Krohn analyzes hysteria using formulations that seem tailor-made for explication of *dybbuk* cases. He begins with the thesis that "hysteria can be variably defined as a disorder which plays out *dominant current culture identities, often to a marginal but never to a socially alienating extreme,*

in an attempt to promote the myth of passivity" (153; my emphasis). He defines the "myth of passivity" as "an attempt to disown, both internally and interpersonally, responsibility in the broadest sense for thoughts, acts and impulses" (153). In Jewish traditional communities, *dybbuk* possession was just such a myth. The ability of the hysteric to resolve individual conflicts by astutely using the dominant forms of the culture attests, according to Krohn, to "his capacity for good reality testing, impulse control and interpersonal sensitivity . . . the capacity to regress and to be flamboyant within the bounds of convention . . . [and] the resiliency and advanced development and differentiation definitional of the hysterical ego" (162). It is not surprising, therefore, that hysterics were rarely considered substantially deviant. Moreover, "in living on the myths treasured by his reference group, the hysteric becomes a *living advocate of the moral and stylistic positions of the culture, a 'yes' man for the social axioms of his milieu*. . . . In remaining for psychological reasons within the limits of convention, they are a *natural conservative force*" (208; my emphasis). This seems a very appropriate summary of the analysis of *dybbuk* possession and exorcism I have presented.

The intimate liaison between "emically" deviant individuals and socio-cultural dicta as formulated by Krohn and as exemplified by *dybbuk* possession may constitute a basis for delineating a distinct subgroup within the broad category of culture-specific syndromes.<sup>48</sup> That individuals in this subgroup may be considered hysterical from a Western psychiatric perspective does not invalidate, in my opinion, their inclusion in this category. Hysteria in the above formulation is defined in terms of *dynamics* and *psychological mechanisms* rather than in terms of symptomatic content. The fact that most culture-specific syndromes are reducible to psychiatric diagnoses insofar as processes are examined is widely acknowledged.<sup>49</sup> "Most such 'ethnic psychoses,'" contends Wallace, "which reflect in their behavior the specific cultural content of the victim's society are simply local varieties of a common disease process to which human beings are vulnerable."<sup>50</sup> Not only is it justified to consider *dybbuk* possession an example of culture-specific syndromes but, in some respects, it might serve as the prototype of "pure cases" in this category. To be considered culture-specific in the precise, restrictive sense exemplified by *dybbuk* possession, then, a syndrome should meet the following criteria, of which not a few of the disorders so designated fall short.

*It should be considered a disease (or a social deviance) on the "emic," native level.* This apparently trivial requirement eliminates some of Krohn's cultural variants of hysteria, such as shamanism and overlapping cases of ceremonial possession (see Langness's suggested distinction between "hysterical psychoses" and "possession").<sup>51</sup>

*The cultural processing of the syndrome should be manifested in the form of specific, meticulously followed role behaviors,* through which a dominant set of beliefs is personified and "empirically validated." To what extent culture participates in the formation of symptoms is crucial, since *some* cultural coloring is typical of many recognized psychiatric disturbances as manifested in ethnically distinct groups.<sup>52</sup> Even though classical culture-specific syndromes such as *amok*, *latab*, *koro*, and *negi negi* "are learned, patterned, recurrent and culturally transmitted,"<sup>53</sup> their enactment does not necessitate the same extent of structuring as is required in the case of the *dybbuk* possession. In particular, indigenous *etiologies*, esoteric and culturally unique as they may appear to the Westerner, cannot constitute a basis for designating a disease entity culture-specific in the restrictive sense suggested here, insofar as they are not *fully* expressed on the visible, "participational" level.<sup>54</sup> *Susto*, another culture-specific syndrome, derives its cultural distinctiveness primarily from its peculiar etiology—soul loss—rather than its symptoms, which include "listlessness, loss of appetite, and withdrawal from social interaction."<sup>55</sup> What appears to Uzzell to be "the most important characteristic of *susto* as an illness role . . . [.] its flexibility,"<sup>56</sup> removes it from the *dybbuk*-type subgroup of culture-specific syndromes. In contrast to the *dybbuk*, *susto*, "in terms of performance . . . is very loose script indeed."<sup>57</sup> I am well aware of the fact that the *dybbuk* would probably appear more flexible in vivo than it does in the written texts. Still, especially during the elaborate exorcistic ritual but also before it, the acting out and personification of an entity deeply rooted in a complicated cosmological belief system must necessarily have called for a high level of structuring. This also seems to hold true for other forms of possession-as-illness.<sup>58</sup>

*The syndrome should be utterly curable.* Culture-specific syndromes such as the *dybbuk* are syndromes with which a culture is able to cope. Since they emerge from a cultural idiom, accepted as part of the prevailing belief system, the elements in the idiom can be manipulated to regain conformity. The symptoms are not idiosyncratically construed but rather derive their form and significance from a set of public symbols shared by all members of the community. From onset to cure, the script of a *dybbuk*-type culture-specific syndrome takes a predetermined course, well known to the participants. As I have already stated, only a small subgroup of potential deviants (one may call them "the truly cultural deviants") are able to resolve their inner conflicts by personifying cosmological identities and themes. This personification requires, on the one hand, that there exists in the community a potent, widely accepted cosmology, and on the other hand, that these individuals possess personal attributes (for example, good reaction testing)

that seriously disturbed people do not possess. Consequently, this would exclude any psychotic disorder from the subgroup suggested here even though benign forms of psychosis are represented among culture-specific syndromes.<sup>59</sup> (That malign psychosis is not liable to *heavy* cultural processing was demonstrated in various anthropological studies.<sup>60</sup> Whether basically hysteric or not, those individuals who are capable of molding their inner conflicts in the service of society are only moderately disturbed.

*The syndrome should not persist following substantial sociocultural changes.* By definition, any culture-specific syndrome is vulnerable to more than superficial modifications in the sociocultural constellation of factors from which it emerged. This is all the more true for "pure cases," modeled on *dybbuk* possession, as they epitomize core elements of a traditional cosmology. When the cosmology decays—when society uses other incompatible idioms—the syndrome is doomed to disappear.

In addition to these conditions, it appears that a state of *disassociation* or, more broadly, *altered consciousness*, plays a major role in the "pure-case" culture-specific syndromes, constituting a psychic matrix conducive to the display of cultural identities markedly at odds with the "regular" self. Indeed, disassociation is amenable to a multitude of cultural interpretations and elaborations, according to Bourguignon.<sup>61</sup> Her illuminating distinction between "trance" and "possession" is frequently represented in various classifications of culture-bound syndromes<sup>62</sup> in which possession syndromes explicitly appear.

In all of this, I do not mean to suggest that the traditional classification of culture-specific syndromes should be narrowed. Rather, I mean to call attention to "pure forms" of cultural disorders that comply with the above criteria and that may be designated "culture-dictated syndromes." This subdivision of culture-specific syndromes may be viewed as located at the extreme end of a continuum representing the extent to which culture intervenes with symptomatic content, the other pole of which involved minimal cultural coloring of the disorder.

In sum, I have argued that *dybbuk* possession is an example of a subgroup within culture-specific syndromes that involved a kind of working alliance between society and a selected group of deviants. In the process, through which deviance was transformed into enhanced conformity, the possessed played a conservative role, endorsing cultural dicta and contributing to social stability. I think it reasonable to assume that culture-specific syndromes such as the *dybbuk* were prevalent in times of crisis precipitated by rapid sociocultural changes; in line with this thesis, their enactment would have constituted a valuable resource of society in protecting and revalidating its endangered myths. (This assumption might be

a promising lead in understanding the enigmatic onset of *dybbuk* possession.) Beyond a crucial amount of cultural change, however, this societal mechanism of defense would fail. Indeed, the disappearance of cases of *dybbuk* possession attests to the profound attenuation of the Jewish traditional way of life in our time. With the exception of secluded ultraorthodox communities (where, indeed, the possibility that rare, unreported cases of *dybbuk* possession still appear cannot be ruled out), no more does Jewish traditional culture pervasively control and monitor the lives of Jews, nor does it offer potent, acceptable idioms for articulating inner experiences and conflicts. As a result, it has lost its capacity to mold and rectify deviance with the vitality and vigor exhibited in *dybbuk* possession and exorcism.

## Notes

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1. In Hebrew, the verb *davok* means "to cleave" or "to stick." The noun *dybbuk* (pl. *dybbukim*) designates an external agent "clinging" to a person.
2. S. Ansky, *The Dybbuk* (New York: Liveright, 1926).
3. I. B. Singer, *Satan in Goray* (New York: Noonday, 1959).
4. See G. Nigal, "The Dybbuk in Jewish Mysticism" (in Hebrew), *Da'at* 4 (1980): 75–100.
5. See *Religion, Altered States of Consciousness and Social Change*, ed. E. Bourguignon (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1973); *Case Studies in Spirit Possession*, ed. V. Gattison and V. Crapanzano (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1977).
6. See E. Bourguignon, *Possession* (Corta Madera, Calif.: Chandler & Sharp, 1976); Y. Bilu, "The Moroccan Demon in Israel: The Case of 'Evil Spirit Disease,'" *Ethos* 8 (1980): 24–39, esp. 36.
7. See Bilu, "Moroccan Demon" for demonic possession among Moroccan Jews.
8. See *Encyclopedia Judaica* 7:573–77, s.v. "Gilgul," by G. Scholem.
9. This proliferation was probably related to recently introduced printing devices. Former centuries were relatively mute in contrast.
10. B. Z. Bokser, *The Jewish Mystical Tradition* (New York: Pilgrim, 1981), 22.
11. Hasidism, founded by Rabbi Israel Ba'al Shem Tov (The Besht) in the first half of the eighteenth century, is a movement clearly based on mystical ideas. Unlike mystical trends in former centuries, it quickly became a mass movement, the centrality of which has persisted in Judaism up to the present.
12. G. Obeyesekere, "The Idiom of Demonic Possession: A Case Study," *Social Science and Medicine* 4 (1970): 97–111.
13. Crapanzano, introduction to Gattison and Crapanzano, *Case Studies*.

14. *Ibid.*, 11.
15. E. T. Gendlin, "A Theory of Personality Change," in *Personality Change*, ed. P. Worchel and D. Byrne (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1964).
16. R. A. Shweder, "Rethinking Culture and Personality, Part III," *Ethos* 2 (1980): 64.
17. For an elaborate discussion of culturally constituted projection, see M. E. Spiro, *Burmese Supernaturalism* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1967), 77. Crapanzano, introduction, in contrast, contends that the Western metaphor of projection involves dimensions different from those associated with the articulated idiom of spirit possession. In the latter, "the tenor [of the metaphor] is located outside the individual from the start" (12).
18. M. Zborowski and E. Herzog, *Life Is with People: The Culture of the Shtetl* (New York: Schocken, 1962), 134–38.
19. Gattison and Crapanzano, *Case Studies*, 18.
20. Spiro, *Burmese Supernaturalism*, 72.
21. "Gilgul."
22. Bilu, "Moroccan Demon"; Bourguignon, *Altered States*; I. M. Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion: An Anthropological Study of Spirit Possession and Shamanism* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1971); T. K. Oesterreich, *Possession, Demoniacal and Other* (New York: Richard Smith, 1930); R. H. Smith, foreword to Crapanzano and Gattison, *Case Studies*; S. S. Walker, *Ceremonial Spirit Possession in Africa and Afro-America* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1972).
23. See Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion*; idem, "Spirit Possession and Deprivation Cults," *Man* 1(1966): 307–29.
24. R. L. Rubenstein, *The Religious Imagination: A Study in Psychoanalysis of Jewish Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 54.
25. Oesterreich, *Possession*, 21.
26. See E. Pressel, "Umbanda in São Paulo: Religious Innovation in a Developing Society," in Bourguignon, *Altered States*.
27. V. Crapanzano, *The Hamadsha: A Study in Moroccan Ethnopsychiatry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973); idem, "Mohammed and Dawia: Possession in Morocco," in Crapanzano and Garrison, *Case Studies*, 141–76.
28. See B. Beit-Hallahmi, "The Turn of the Screw and The Exorcist: Demoniacal Possession and Childhood Purity," *American Imago* 33 (1976): 296–303; D. H. Dwyer, *Images and Self-Images: Males and Females in Morocco* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978).
29. In traditional Jewish terms, children up to the age of ten might have been so designated.
30. This episode was apparently a major source for Ansky's play.
31. Dwyer, *Images and Self-Images*, 165–84.
32. See C. Smith Rosenberg, "The Hysterical Woman: Sex Roles and Role Conflict in 19th Century America," *Social Research* 39 (1972): 652–77.
33. Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion*, 58.
34. L. P. Ullman and L. Krasner, *A Psychological Approach to Abnormal Behavior* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1969), 110.
35. S. Freud, "A Seventeenth Century Demonological Neurosis," in *Freud: Studies in Parapsychology*, ed. P. Rieff (New York: Collier Books, 1963).
36. I shall present it in full length in another paper.
37. Phylacteries (*tefillin*) are sacred ornaments that all male Jews from their thirteenth birthday on are commanded to wear during morning prayers.
38. See Oesterreich, *Possession*, 103.
39. See Bilu, "Moroccan Demon"; R. Patai, "Exorcism and Xenoglossia among the Safed Kabbalists," *Journal of American Folklore* 91 (1978): 823–35.
40. Bilu, "Moroccan Demon," 36.
41. On the other hand, all the first cases were written in a matter-of-fact style with no evidence of wonder at the bizarre, unprecedented occurrence. As was stated earlier, the question of the onset of the *dybbuk* phenomenon is still unsettled.
42. See Crapanzano, *Hamadsha*, 215; idem, introduction, 33; J. G. Kennedy, "Nubian Zar Ceremonies as Psychotherapy," *Human Organization* 4 (1967): 185–94; D. Landy, ed., *Culture, Disease and Healing: Studies in Medical Anthropology* (New York: Macmillan, 1977); F. E. Torrey, *The Mind Game: Witchdoctors and Psychiatrists* (New York: Emerson Hall, 1972).
43. Here an interesting correspondence is implied between his death and sexual behavior.
44. See Spiro, *Burmese Supernaturalism*.
45. On the same use of possession in the struggle between Catholics and Protestants, see Oesterreich, *Possession*, 30.
46. Ullman and Krasner, *Psychological Approach*, 71.
47. A. Krohn, *Hysteria: The Elusive Neurosis* (New York: International Universities Press, 1978). Page references are hereafter cited in the text.
48. Also called "culture-bound syndromes" (Lebra and Yap), "exotic psychotic syndromes" (Arieti), and "hysterical psychoses" (Langness), to mention but a few such designations.
49. See A. Kiev, *Transcultural Psychiatry* (New York: Free Press, 1973).
50. A. Wallace, *Culture and Personality*, 2d ed. (New York: Random House, 1970), 218–19.
51. L. L. Langness, "Hysterical Psychoses and Possession," in *Culture-Bound Syndromes in Ethnopsychiatry and Alternative Therapies*, ed. W. P. Lebra (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1976).
52. See A. Kiev, *Magic, Faith, and Healing*; idem, *Transcultural Psychiatry*; M. K. Opler, *Culture and Mental Health* (New York: Macmillan, 1959).
53. Langness, "Hysterical Psychoses," 60.
54. Bilu, "Moroccan Demon," 31.
55. See D. Uzzell, "Susto Revisited: Illness as a Strategic Role," *American Ethnologist* 1 (1974): 369; J. P. Gillin, "Magical Fright," in *Social Studies and Per-*



sonality: *A Case Book*, ed. Y. A. Cohen (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1961); A. J. Rubel, "The Epidemiology of a Folk-Illness: Susto in Hispanic America," *Ethnology* 3 (1964):268-83.

56. Uzzell, "Susto Revisited," 372.

57. Ibid.

58. Bilu, "Moroccan Demon"; G. Obeyesekere, "Psychocultural Exegesis of a Case of Spirit Possession in Sri Lanka," in Crapanzano and Gattison, *Case Studies*, 235-94.

59. See *The American Handbook of Psychiatry*, ed. S. Arieti (New York: Basic Books, 1959); Langness, "Hysterical Psychoses."

60. See, for example, R. B. Edgerton, "Conceptions of Psychosis in Four East-African Societies," *American Anthropologist* 68(1966): 408-25; J. Murphy, "Psychiatric Labeling in Cross-Cultural Perspectives," *Science* 191 (1976): 1019-28.

61. Bourguignon, *Altered States*; idem, "Possession and Trance in Cross-Cultural Study of Mental Health," in Lebra, *Culture-Bound Syndromes*.

62. See Kiev, *Magic, Faith, and Healing*; P. M. Yap, "The Culture-Bound Reactive Syndromes," in *Mental Health Research in Asia and the Pacific*, ed. W. Caudill and T. Y. Lin (Honolulu: East-West Center Press, 1969).

## Possession and Exorcism in the Magical Texts of the Cairo Geniza

JONATHAN SEIDEL

This essay describes the rituals of power in the Cairo Geniza documents, which claim to rid afflicted people of ghosts, spirits, and demons. My intent is to look at the exorcisms in the Geniza with an eye to earlier and later traditions of spirit expulsion. We do not find extensive narratives or documentary case histories of spirit possession and performative exorcisms in these materials, but the Geniza texts do form an important prelude to the medieval and early modern materials. They constitute a significant backdrop to the majority of exorcism stories in this volume, that is, narrative accounts of spirit possession in early modern Judaism. This essay should thus provide some textual and historical background to the accounts from Safed and post-Lurianic kabbalistic circles.

I am also interested in the specific phenomenology of possession and the language of the ritual texts that were written for the purpose of ending possession. Along the way, I will address the constellation of issues associated with Jewish spirit possession and exorcism in general: the Greco-Roman background to the rhetorical style and poetics of the texts, the character and moral status of the afflicting spirits, "healing," the process of adjuration, and the historiolic or mythic power of the formulae.

### The Setting for Spirit Possession and Exorcism in Late Antiquity

A preliminary question in the history of possession in Judaism is the problem of spirit possession and its cultural and psychological setting. A study of the recent social scientific literature on possession and exorcism (Bourguignon, Crapanzano, Bilu, Kapferer, I. M. Lewis<sup>1</sup>) reveals five aspects of this field over which scholars differ: (1) criteria for identification of possession; (2) causes of demon possession; (3) the culture in which the possessed