

Avraham of Gerona and the Night Women

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In 1380 Avraham ben Yitzhak of Gerona, a noted scholar, poet and communal leader, wrote an essay in Hebrew in which he attempted to explain current reports of women engaging in bizarre activities in the middle of the night.¹ His description is an early version of the witch legend which ultimately led to the witch trials of the 15th to 18th centuries. Avraham's essay affords us an important glimpse into the popular culture and beliefs of both the Jewish and Christian communities of northern Spain in the late 14th century, their interrelationship as well as the interrelationship of the popular and elite cultures. It likewise provides valuable insight on the development of the witch legend and its theoretical underpinnings at an early, embryonic stage of its formulation as well as a very rare glimpse of its formulation within the Jewish world.

Avraham began his essay by describing the phenomenon of the "night women":

I see fit to discuss and write about a matter which has become well known among the common people of the non Jews. This is the matter of the 'night women', in other words they who walk about in the middle of the night, they who are called in the Hebrew language 'brushas', the stranglers of small children and in the language of the Christian masses "the good women who walk at night."²

¹ In 1888, David Kaufman, a lecturer at the Rabbinical Seminary in Budapest published Avraham's essay in the Hebrew journal *Knesset Yisrael* (Warsaw) from a manuscript (Oxford 2218H 4) which he compared to a printed source whose date and place of publication are unknown, based on a different manuscript. Kaufman: 561

There is little biographical information about the author. He was the brother of Astruc Ha Levy. In 1393, Profiat Duran HaLevy (Ha Efodi) sent a letter of condolence to EnYosef Avraham on the death of his father whom he described as "the wise rabbi, great leader and poet, Don Avraham ben Yitzhak HaLevy." Kaufman: 560. In 1370, Avraham participated in an informal poetic "competition" involving Nissim Gerondi, Yehudah bar Sheshet Crescas, and Hasdai Crescas. The correspondence between the participants reveals close personal and literary ties. Feldman: 125-160.

² Kaufman: 562.

Avraham describes the spread of reports of women engaging in mysterious and illicit nocturnal activity and of widespread popular belief in these reports. Avraham himself calls the women in question "night women", whom he then defines as those who walk abroad in the middle of the night. (The origin of his term is unclear but is most probably his own and alludes to the female demon "Lilith", as we will see.) After describing a phenomenon common to both the Jewish and Christian communities, the spread of reports about the night women he then proceeds to make cultural distinctions in nomenclature. He identifies the night women with women known in the Hebrew language as *brushas* and among the Christian masses as "good women." It is unclear how Avraham is using this nomenclature. Is he describing how these women were called in each of the respective communities? Or is he himself identifying these women with existing cultural constructs within the two communities? In other words is he describing a process of identification that has already taken place among the people or is he identifying them himself for the sake of the reader? If Avraham is explaining how these women were called and understood within both the Jewish and Christian cultural contexts, he is essentially describing the conceptualization of the witch in both Jewish and Christian contemporary culture. If the identification is his own, he is attempting to explain a recent phenomenon by placing it within a known cultural context.

Avraham identifies the night women with women called in the contemporary Hebrew of his environment ("the Hebrew language") *brushas*, clearly a borrowing from the Catalan word for witch (*bruixa*). According to the Jewish belief they strangled young children. Avraham's use of nomenclature is intriguing and raises questions about the language or dialect of the Jews of Catalonia. Why did Avraham, a master of the Hebrew language, writing in fluent Hebrew, describe an obviously foreign word as Hebrew? Was the term in constant usage among the Jews of Catalonia to describe the phenomenon of the night women? Why then did he not explain that this was the term employed by the "Jewish masses" just as the "good women" was the term used by the Christian masses. Did pervasive usage of a term within the Jewish community render that term Hebrew according to Avraham? Were not the Jews of Catalonia speaking Catalan, the local language? Why then was their use of a Catalan term significant? Why was it considered Hebrew? Why was it transliterated into Hebrew rather than translated as was the term "good women"? Two conclusions may be drawn from the wording of the text. First, the phrase "in the

Hebrew language" was to the author synonymous with the expression "in the language of the Jews." It is used symmetrically to the expression "in the language of the Christian masses." Does this then indicate that the Jews of Catalonia spoke Hebrew or a Hebrew based dialect as a vernacular? The text cannot support any conclusion and the question, though fascinating, is beyond the scope of this paper.

The second conclusion that may be drawn from the text however is that the word *brushas* was transliterated and not translated into literary Hebrew because it was a culturally loaded term replete with meanings that could not be successfully translated into another language. This conclusion is corroborated by the phrase which immediately follows the word *brushas*, "stranglers of small children." It would appear that in the Jewish dialect of Catalonia the term '*brusha*' had acquired the specific meaning of a human female who strangled children. It can be assumed that this Jewish popular belief was derived from the traditional legend of the female demon Lilith who strangles babies. In other words, the term '*brusha*' had become fused with the legend of Lilith. The connection between Lilith (in Hebrew *Lilit*) and the *nashim leiliot* (the night women) is apparent.³ The incongruous description of '*brusha*' as a term within the Hebrew language can now be understood: the term had fused with the Lilith legend and acquired a specific meaning within the Jewish community. The *brusas* were a known cultural entity, stranglers of children whose identity was now being fused, in the Jewish popular imagination or in the mind of Avraham, with that of a more recent cultural phenomenon, the night women.

Avraham then proceeds to explain that the night women were known in the language of the Christian masses as "the good women who walk at night." Avraham's Hebrew phrase is a direct translation of the term found in Latin documents, *bonae mulieres*. In ancient European folklore the *bonae* were originally spirits or elves who entered houses at night. If they found that the masters of the house had laid out for them food, they would bless the home. The church transformed the *bonae*, along with other creatures of folklore and the pagan gods, into demons. With the passage of time these demons were transformed into humans in league with demons, or witches. The belief in women who enter homes at night to search for food merged with the story of women who went out at night to hunt with the goddess/ demon Diana (or one of her

³ On "Lilith" see Scholem 1948: 165-175, Scholem 1974: 356-361 and Encyclopaedia Judaica 11:245-249

Germanic counterparts) and developed into the myth of women who go out at night to feast and run riot. German documents from the 9th and 13th centuries mention the popular belief in the *bonae* who go out at night and enter houses through closed doors.⁴ There is evidence of belief in the *bonae* in Catalonia forty years before Avraham wrote his essay. In 1341 a woman accused of witchcraft in Castellví de la Marca claimed that she went out at night with the *bonae mulieres*.⁵

Avraham then proceeds to describe in detail the content of the rumors, the nocturnal activities of the said women. In relating the details of these rumors, Avraham does not distinguish between Jewish and Christian versions of the story. It is clear from the text that the Jewish and Christian communities of Catalonia were confronted by the same cultural phenomenon: reports of women leaving their homes at night to engage in bizarre and disturbing activities. Avraham interweaves into his description the popular explanation of the phenomenon, as he understood it. As these women sleep in their beds at night, their souls leave their bodies and assume the form of their own bodies or the bodies of animals. In these forms the souls of the women enter closed houses where they move objects. (Providing a cogent answer to the eternal question of why things never stay where we leave them!) The women then gather and make merry. They dance, play, make music, slaughter and cook cattle and sheep, and feast. After these activities the souls return to the bodies of the women who resume a normal state of sleep, body and soul reunited. The women retain "impressions" of the activities that transpired in the night and can relate their experiences to others.⁶

Many the details of the nocturnal antics of the night women as related by Avraham are common to versions of the witch myth from the 15th century, the era of the flourishing of the witch craze in Europe. The congregation of women at night to dance and feast, their assumption of the appearance of animals, and their entry into closed houses are all elements of the classic formulation of the witch myth. Accusations of witchcraft were already known in Catalonia before Avraham's time. In

⁴ Russell 1972: 23, 53, 70, 82, 117-118, 134-135, 156-157, 175-176, 210-213, 236, 245-6, 274-279, 326. Idem 1980: 53.

⁵ "...dixerunt quod Elicsendis Solera se fa devinadora et dicit quod ambulat cum bonis mulieribus." (12/12/ 1341, Castellví de la Marca) Peanau I Espelt: 53.

⁶ Kaufman: 559-566.

Barcelona in 1303 two Jewish women were accused of witchcraft.⁷ The witch craze began to gather momentum in the middle of the 14th century and reached its climax in the 15th century.⁸ In Saragossa nine women were burnt at the stake between 1498-1535..⁹

However, two important element of this formulation is lacking. In Avraham's version the women walk or wander but do not fly. The witches' flight is a basic component of the witch myth from the 15th century with roots in ancient sources of the myth.¹⁰ Similarly, the orgies and other sexual activities common to descriptions of the witches "sabbath" in the 15th century are absent from Avraham's account.¹¹ It would thus appear that Avraham's description of the night women reflects a relatively early stage in the development of the image of the witch.

According to Avraham the popular understanding of the phenomenon of the night women was that the souls of the women separated from their bodies, took on external forms and performed activities. It is important to emphasize that Avraham presents this popular understanding of the phenomenon as a belief common to Jews and Christians. This popular belief is very close to ideas discussed by the intellectual elite of the Middle Ages. The popular explanation for the night women is closely related to a concept known in Latin as *fascinatio*, 'fascination' in English. Fascination refers to the power of the soul to control people or objects outside of itself, often through the eyes. Hence it is the basis for the belief in the "evil eye" a concept discussed by Arab Christian and Jewish philosophers and accepted by many of them, including the important Catalan Jewish scholars and physicians, Nahmanides, Nissim Gerondi, and Avraham's contemporary and friend Hasdai Crescas.¹² The night women are an extreme example of this "mind over matter" phenomenon. Their souls actually leave their bodies, take on physical forms and act upon the external physical world. The ability of the soul to control matter, including its own body and external objects is the root of the popular explanation of the night women as presented by Avraham.

Mutual interaction between the body and the soul was a basic principle of the Greek-Arabic medicine of the Middle Ages. It formed the conceptual basis of the

⁷ Perarnau i Espelt: 54

⁸ Russell1972: 227-228, 272..

⁹ Lea 1922: 210-211.

¹⁰ Russell 1972: 236. Lea: 208-209.

¹¹ Russell 1972: 236, 246-249.

¹² See Davidson: 193-207.

physiological explanation of the development of the personality and the emotions according to the theory of 'complexion' (*krasis*) and bodily humors. The body-soul connection was also used to explain medical phenomena including the spread of disease and the influence of emotions on the body. Nahmanides and Nissim Gerondi, used the body soul connection to explain the physiological basis of personality development and the effect of the emotions on health and recovery. These ideas can also be found in the very popular *Sefer HaHinukh* written in Barcelona in the 13th century. The capacity of the soul to overwhelm the body was also used by Nahmanides and others in biblical commentary to explain difficult passages such as dietary prohibitions, the laws of impurity and the transformation of Lot's wife into a pillar of salt.¹³ It would appear that either the learned theories of fascination discussed by philosophers had their origins in popular belief in the power of the soul to control external objects, or that intellectual concepts trickled down to the popular level and influenced the development of the theory behind the night witches.

The reports of the night women which spread among the "gentile masses" reached the Jewish community as well, where apparently their veracity was accepted by the Jewish common people, though not by Avraham himself who declared that the rumors he has described are completely false, those who repeat them worthy of ridicule and those who believe them worthy of scorn.¹⁴ Avraham emphasizes very clearly throughout the essay that this is a popular belief or superstition. Avraham wrote his essay in reaction to the current popularity and publicity of the witch myth. He made it very clear that he regarded belief in the night women as essentially an element of popular culture, a belief of the masses, not of the cultural elite.

Avraham neither explicitly denies nor confirms the veracity of the reports of women engaged in nocturnal activity. He did not attempt to deny the testimonies of women who recounted their participation in activities which took place while they were ostensibly asleep in their beds or were able to describe objects inside homes that they had never entered under normal circumstances. Although he remained skeptical about the facts, Avraham felt compelled by the general acceptance of the reports to offer a plausible explanation:

What can I do when so many people from different nations
acknowledge that this matter is accepted as truth among them. Therefore I

¹³ See Davidson: 189-193

¹⁴ Kaufman:562

will explain a way in which it is possible to believe a little of it, and if things which are not real exceed those that are real it is of no consequence for that is the way with popular beliefs.¹⁵

Avraham does however emphatically reject the popular explanation of the phenomenon, namely that the woman's soul becomes separated from her body and acquires a different form. To this "popular" belief Avraham offers an alternate, intellectual, scholarly explanation: the nocturnal activities ascribed to these women, are performed by *shedim*, demons who take the form of women or animals. The women are attracted to the demons and unite with them. Because of their weak intellects, the women soon fall under the power of the demons who control their imaginations. While the women sleep, the demons transfer to them their own memories of the night's activities. When the women awake they remember the activities as if they had done them themselves. The demons do the deeds but give the women their memories.¹⁶

To summarize, Avraham's report provides evidence of widespread belief in what purports to be an empirical phenomenon of women wandering around at night breaking into homes and having wild parties. It includes a popular explanation of this phenomenon based on the relatively sophisticated philosophical concept of the duality of the soul and body. The author of the treatise, an intellectual of the Jewish cultural elite then offers an alternative explanation based on the ancient (but to him very modern) belief in demons.

However, Avraham did not assume that the reality of demons and their interaction with humans could be taken for granted. He brought three sources of authority to prove the existence of demons to his readers: 1) the widespread belief in their existence among all cultures and peoples. 2) the *Torah* 3) the *midrash*. On the basis of these authorities Avraham explains that demons are made of the elements of fire and air (or wind) and are able to fly and to take the form of people and animals in order to execute their plans. While pious people and conjurers are able to control the demons,

¹⁵ Ibid: 562

¹⁶ Ibid: 562 ,565

the demons themselves control weaker humans and force them to serve them and do their will.¹⁷

Belief in the existence of demons with various degrees of reservation as to the extent of their powers was accepted among the intellectual Jewish elite of Catalonia in the 13th and 14th centuries. Nahmanides placed them within the medieval cosmology and made a legal distinction between the conjuration of demons, which he permitted, and the biblical prohibition of sorcery (*kishuf*).¹⁸ The noted Catalan scholar Yithak ben Sheshet Perfet, (HaRivash), a contemporary of Avraham accepted Nahmanides distinction between *kishuf* and conjuration and took it one step further. He distinguished between *kishuf* in which genuine physical changes were made by means of invoking the angels of destruction and conjuration of demons in which the demons create an appearance of change.¹⁹ As we will see, his distinction is reminiscent of the evolution within contemporary Christian thought.²⁰

It would appear that in his description of the demons, Avraham was heavily influenced by his friend Hasdai Crescas who discussed the reality of demons in his monumental work *Or Adonai*. Crescas proved the reality of demons from four sources of authority: the *Torah*, rabbinical literature, accepted universal opinion and the senses. He described the demons as light creatures, able to tell the future yet harmful to men, attempting to corrupt, provoke and dominate them.²¹

To further prove the existence of demons, Avraham concluded his essay by relating an incident that took place in the recent past in Gerona. A girl went down to the cellar of her house where she saw a boy playing. The boy tempted her to draw close to him by setting before her eggs. The girl related the incident to her parents who returned with her to the cellar. In the next few days the boy gave them three hundred eggs while local merchants reported that eggs had gone missing. Avraham stresses that all three witnesses, the girl and her parents, were trustworthy and reliable.²² Though he does not say so explicitly, Avraham clearly implies that the boy

¹⁷ Kaufman: 562-565. It is possible that Avraham felt the need to prove the existence of demons in reaction to neoplatonic scholars in Spain in the second half of the 14th century who argued that demons are a figment of the imagination. On these scholars see Schwartz: 189-196.

¹⁸ See Davidson: 151-162.

¹⁹ Rivash: vol 1: 92: 82-83. See Davidson: 167.

²⁰ Caro-Baroja 1964:79 ff.

²¹ Crescas: 402-404. (The fourth essay, the sixth section, "shedim".) See Davidson: 167.

²² Kaufman: 566.

was a demon. The story provides an example of how a demon takes the form of a human, enters a closed space and allures humans by offering enticements of material gain. His first target is female, providing a link to the night women story. Both the child and her parents accept eggs from him and are thus apparently drawn into his influence. We do not know the ultimate fate of this family but Avraham is clearly indicating to the reader that the power of demons over humans begins with the seduction of the weak and innocent by apparently harmless beings.

Avraham's demons are powerful. They shapeshift and run amok. In this Avraham differs radically from Nahmanides and his followers who described the demons as severely limited in their powers. Avraham was possibly influenced by contemporary changes in Christian belief. Early Christian belief limited the power of demons to illusion and deceit. Early church doctrine with regard to witchcraft, expressed in the *canon episcopi* from the 11th century was that the devil, either by himself or by means of his minions, the demons, took control over the mind of a woman and placed within it false images which the woman believed to be true. The power of Satan was the power of deceit and illusion. In the 13th century, Christian scholars influenced by Thomas Aquinas rejected this opinion and proclaimed the demons capable of performing genuine acts with concrete results. This belief became official church doctrine in 1326.²³ Official church doctrine with regard to witchcraft developed on similar lines. In the 13th century it was believed that by means of the demons witches performed genuine acts on behalf of their master the devil. This belief gained widespread acceptance in the following centuries and became the groundwork for the witch trials of the 15th and 16th centuries. In Spain conservative attitudes toward witchcraft prevailed longer. In the 15th century the bishops of Avila and Cuenca affirmed their belief in the *canon episcopi*.²⁴

Several European authors in the 13th and 14th centuries mentioned the popular belief in "good women" that go out at night and enter locked houses. Many expressed doubts about the veracity of the reports. Several came to the conclusion of Avraham, the women were demons disguised in human form. In the 13th century, Jean de Meun, the author of the popular work *The Romance of the Rose*, mentioned people who

²³ Caro-Baroja 1990: 22-29. Lea 1922: 179-191.

²⁴ Caro-Baroja 1990: 19-43. Lea 1922: 209-212. Caro-Baroja 1964: 103.

believe that their souls leave their bodies, pass through close doors and enter homes. Like Avraham, de Meun believed that this was a delusion.²⁵

Avraham clearly accepted the Christian explanation for the night women: the control of demons over the women. The precise explanation provided by Avraham is an intermediate point within the evolving Christian opinion. On the one hand he denied the participation of the women themselves in the nocturnal activities. They were guilty of collusion with the demons but no more. The demons committed all the acts while the women slept in their beds. According to the traditional Christian view, Avraham described the power of the demons to create false memories within the minds of the women. On the other hand, in accordance with the new theories, the nocturnal activities were real acts committed by the demons themselves, not merely illusions in the minds of the women. Avraham's version of Christian belief may reflect a contemporary stage in the evolution of these ideas in Catalonia or his own understanding of conflicting opinions.

The obvious difference between the explanation offered by Avraham and contemporary Christian belief is the complete absence of the devil in Avraham's account. Neither the women themselves nor the demons who master them are servants of the devil. The demons appear to be working for themselves and the devil is never mentioned. In Christian thought demons and witches were the slaves of the devil. Sorcery and witchcraft were devil worship. This became the explanation for the biblical injunction "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live"²⁶ This is the essential formulation of the witch myth.²⁷ In 1376, four years before Avraham wrote his essay, Nicholas Eymerich of Gerona, a Dominican monk and later Inquisitor General of Aragon wrote instructions for inquisitors in which he postulated three forms of witchcraft: worship of the devil by offering sacrifices, worship of the devil by prayer, and asking the devil for assistance, the latter being a lesser form of heresy.²⁸

Avraham presents demons in their traditional Jewish formulation as it continued to be understood by his Jewish contemporaries. Demons are natural beings, independent creatures, part of the created world and endowed with their own limited powers. They are annoying and harmful but not truly evil. Though they can control humans of weak

²⁵ Russell 1972: 117-118, 134-135, 156-157, 175-176, 210-213.

²⁶ Exodus 22:18. (King James Version)

²⁷ Russell 1972: 241, 253.

²⁸ Caro-Baroja 1964: 79-80, 91.

intellect, they themselves can be controlled by humans of strong intellect, the pious and those learned in the ways of conjuring demons.

Returning to our original question of nomenclature, there is one word significantly absent in Avraham's discussion, namely the Hebrew word *mekhashefa* (witch). I have used the word "witch" in English to associate this phenomenon with the witch craze, but Avraham himself never uses the word *mekhashefa* nor alludes to *kishuf*. The women in question are referred to only by the neutral term "night women." This is crucial because the Hebrew word *mekhashefa* is a loaded term carrying a prohibition from the Torah. The witch must die.²⁹ It is this biblical verse which provided the proof-text for the execution of so many women. The biblical prohibition is completely absent from Avraham's understanding of the witch phenomenon. Avraham had accepted current Christian scholarly opinion, the demonic explanation of witchcraft but without two crucial elements: the devil and the understanding of the phenomenon as *kishuf*.

Avraham's explanation of the phenomenon of the night women indicates that it is in fact Avraham and not the common people who identified the night women with the *brushas* and the 'good women'. Avraham deliberately used these terms to explain to the reader that women associated with demons were perpetrating these acts. He in fact began his essay by offering his explanation of the phenomenon by drawing upon existing cultural concepts. Though both the *brushas* and the *bonae* were perceived in contemporary popular culture as women, both images were based upon ancient traditions of demons. As we have seen, the *bonae* were originally perceived as spirits, then demons and then women. The *brusha* belief was clearly based on the ancient tradition of Lilith the female demon who strangled children at night. To reinforce his elitist intellectual argument that the cause of the phenomenon is demonic, Avraham deliberately alluded to elements of popular culture with a demonic connection.

At the end of the essay Avraham returns to the *brushas* and further explains that they strangle babies in the first week of their lives. He emphasizes that this belief is in the "mouths of our masses" in other words a widely held popular belief particular to the Jewish common people. He explains that the victims are chosen while they are as yet unprotected by the *mitzvah* of *brit milah*. They are the children of people who the demons know will not be enticed by them yet are not pious enough to warrant divine

²⁹ Exodus 22:18

protection. As soon as the watchful eye of their caregivers is withdrawn from them, the babies fall victim to the demons who strangle them and then impress upon the minds of the *brushas* the memory of having done so.³⁰ Both the night women and the *brushas* were clearly perceived in the popular imagination as women. Avraham is clarifying that the night women and the *brushas* are two examples of the same phenomenon, women in the power of demons who merely believe they have performed acts committed by the demons.

We have before us an example of popular belief common to two cultures (women who run riot at night) and an intellectual elite version of the same belief which differs from it significantly (the demons, not the women, run riot). There would seem to have been a greater affinity between popular belief in both cultures than between popular and elite conceptualizations. There was also common ground to the elite of both cultures (the demonic explanation) with significant differences (the role of the devil).

The popular conception of the witch legend empowered women, though not in a positive way. In the popular explanation of the phenomenon, the women are powerful. Though there is no mention of persecution it is easy to see how such a belief could inspire fear. The power of the women to free their souls from their bodies is real and intrinsic to them. The women act from power within themselves and not with external aid of demons or the devil. The souls of the women remain in control and work alone. In contrast, Avraham's explanation degrades women as intellectually weak, controlled and exploited by demons who have their own agenda and the means of pursuing it. Yet the women themselves are not demonized by Avraham. They are the tools of the demons but not in league with the devil. They are not yet "witches". It was this further Christian elaboration of the understanding of the cultural elite which gained precedence over public opinion and led to the persecution and death of many European women.

³⁰ Kaufman: 565-566.

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