

# WRESTLING WITH DEMONS

*A History of Rabbinic Attitudes to Demons*



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**Cover Illustration:** The Talmud describes how King Solomon spoke with demons. This illustration is from Jacobus de Teramo's *Das Buch Belial* (Augsburg 1473).

# WRESTLING WITH DEMONS

## Introduction

From Scripture to Talmud and Midrash through medieval Jewish writings, we find mention of dangerous and evil beings. Scripture refers to them as Azazel and *se'irim*; later writings refer to them as *sheidim*, *ruchot* and *mazikim*. All these are different varieties (or different names) of demons.

Belief in demons (and the associated belief in witches, magic and occult phenomena) was widespread in the ancient world, and the terror that it caused is unimaginable to us.<sup>1</sup> But in the civilized world today there is virtually nobody who still believes in them. The transition from a global approach of belief to one of disbelief began with Aristotle, gained a little more traction in the early medieval period, and finally concretized in the eighteenth century.

Perhaps surprisingly, there has not been any comprehensive review of Jewish attitudes to demons over the ages. In this paper I shall attempt such a review. When beginning this project, I decided to divide the list between those who did believe in demons, and those who rejected their existence. In the conclusion, however, I will explain why this division is seen to be ultimately unsatisfactory.

## The Talmud's Demonology

There are numerous references to demons in the Babylonian Talmud.<sup>2</sup> With regard to their formation, there is a view that demons were created on the eve of the first Shabbat of creation,<sup>3</sup> another statement about bats turning into demons,<sup>4</sup> and another account of how demons of various types were generated from Adam's wasted seminal

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<sup>1</sup> See Joshua Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition*, p. 44.

<sup>2</sup> A comprehensive collection of Talmudic, Midrashic and medieval statements about demons can be found in Ronald H. Isaacs, *Ascending Jacob's Ladder: Jewish Views of Angels, Demons, and Evil Spirits* (Rowman & Littlefield, 1997) pp. 91-118.

<sup>3</sup> Mishnah, *Avot* 5:6; Babylonian Talmud, *Pesachim* 54a.

<sup>4</sup> *Bava Kama* 16a.

emissions.<sup>5</sup> Another passage, later to become very important to those discussing demonology, specifies the nature of demons:

The Rabbis taught: Six things were said about demons; three in which they resemble ministering angels, and three in which they resemble human beings. The three in which they resemble ministering angels are that they have wings, they fly from one end of the earth to the other, and they know the future... And the three in which they resemble humans are that they eat and drink, reproduce, and die. (Babylonian Talmud, *Chagigah* 16a; *Avot D'Rabbi Natan* 37)

Demons played a role in halachic discussions, such as whether a voice uttering a declaration of halachic significance, heard from a person who cannot be found, is suspected as having been uttered by a demon,<sup>6</sup> and whether a warning to a criminal given by a demon counts as a warning such as to render him liable for subsequently sinning.<sup>7</sup> The Talmud also warns about many situations in which there is danger from demons, such as in the shade of various trees and touching their stumps,<sup>8</sup> in ruined buildings,<sup>9</sup> in graveyards,<sup>10</sup> in a house in which one is sleeping alone,<sup>11</sup> when having things in pairs,<sup>12</sup> and when drinking from rivers or lakes at night.<sup>13</sup> There is also a demon by the name of Yosef who gave one of the Sages information about the nature of demonic activities,<sup>14</sup> as well as being suggested to have possibly taught the Sages various teachings.<sup>15</sup> Another demon, which haunted the study hall of Abaye, appeared to Rav Acha bar Yaakov as a seven-headed snake and was killed by him.<sup>16</sup> The Talmud also tells of how King Solomon trapped the demon Ashmodai and forced him to reveal secrets to him.<sup>17</sup> Another passage speaks of the great prevalence of demons, as well as giving instructions on how to detect them:

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<sup>5</sup> *Eruvin* 18b.

<sup>6</sup> *Yevamot* 122a; *Gittin* 66a.

<sup>7</sup> *Makkot* 6b.

<sup>8</sup> *Pesachim* 111a-b.

<sup>9</sup> *Berachot* 3a-b.

<sup>10</sup> *Chagigah* 3b.

<sup>11</sup> *Shabbat* 151b.

<sup>12</sup> *Pesachim* 110b.

<sup>13</sup> *Pesachim* 112a. For discussion, see Bar-Ilan, Meir, "Exorcism by Rabbis: Talmudic Sages and Magic," *Da'at* 34 (1995), pp. 17-31.

<sup>14</sup> *Pesachim* 110a.

<sup>15</sup> *Eruvin* 43a.

<sup>16</sup> *Kiddushin* 29b.

<sup>17</sup> *Gittin* 68a-b.

It has been taught: Abba Benjamin says, If the eye had the power to see the demons, no creature could endure them. Abaye says: They are more numerous than we are and they surround us like the ridge round a field. R. Huna says: Every one among us has a thousand on his left and ten thousand on his right. Rava says: They are responsible for the crushing in the Kallah lectures, fatigue in the knees, the wearing out of the clothes of the scholars from rubbing against them, and the bruising of the feet. If one wants to discover them, let him take sifted ashes and sprinkle around his bed, and in the morning he will see something like the footprints of a cock. If one wishes to see them, let him take the afterbirth of a black she-cat which is the offspring of a black she-cat, the firstborn of a firstborn, roast it in fire and grind it to powder, and then let him put some into his eye, and he will see them. Let him also pour it into an iron tube and seal it with an iron signet that they should not steal it from him, and let him also close his mouth, so that he should not come to harm. R. Bibi b. Abaye did so, saw them and came to harm. The sages, however, prayed for him and he recovered. (Babylonian Talmud, *Berachot* 6a-b)

References to demons in the Jerusalem Talmud are much less common.<sup>18</sup> In fact, there is a reference in the Babylonian Talmud to a certain verse which was translated in Babylon as referring to male and female demons, but which in the west (i.e. in the Land of Israel) was translated as referring to carriages.<sup>19</sup> The Babylonian Talmud further notes that the demonic risk involved in pairs, which was a subject of great concern in Babylon, was not an issue for their counterparts in the Land of Israel:

In the West, they are not cautious about having things in pairs... The rule of the matter is that for those who take note of the pairs, the pairs take note of them; those who do not take note of the pairs are not bothered by them. Nonetheless, it is good to show a modicum of concern. (Babylonian Talmud, *Pesachim* 110b)

## Medieval Deniers of Demons

It is the general consensus of the academic community that **Rambam** denied the existence of demons. Amongst traditional scholars, those who accepted that Rambam denied the existence of demons include the Gerona kabbalist R. Shlomo b. Meshullam

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<sup>18</sup> Louis Ginzberg, *The Palestinian Talmud* (New York, 1941), pp. xxxiii-xxxvi: "Palestinian authors of the Talmud excluded, almost entirely, the popular fancies about angels and demons, while in Babylonia angelology and demonology gained scholastic recognition and with it entrance into the Talmud... A similar observation can be made in regard to the difference in the attitudes of the two Talmuds toward sorcery, magic, astrology, and other kinds of superstitions." For examples of references in the Jerusalem Talmud, see *Shabbat* 1:3, 3b and *Gittin* 6:6, 48b.

<sup>19</sup> Babylonian Talmud, *Gittin* 68a.

da Piera,<sup>20</sup> R. Yosef b. Shem Tov,<sup>21</sup> R. Yosef Shlomo Delmedigo,<sup>22</sup> R. Aviad Sar-Shalom Basilea,<sup>23</sup> Abarbanel,<sup>24</sup> the Vilna Gaon,<sup>25</sup> R. Yosef Ergas,<sup>26</sup> R. Yosef Shaul Nathanson,<sup>27</sup> R. Menashe ben Yisrael,<sup>28</sup> R. Eliezer Neusatz,<sup>29</sup> R. Eliezer Simcha Rabinowitz,<sup>30</sup> *Nofet Tzufim*,<sup>31</sup> and R. Yosef Kapach.<sup>32</sup>

However, there is a long list of traditionalists who did not (perhaps one should say: could not<sup>33</sup>) accept that Rambam denied the existence of demons, and claimed that he believed in their existence.<sup>34</sup> This list including recent figures such as R. Tzefanyah Arusi,<sup>35</sup> R. Zvi Yehudah Kook<sup>36</sup> and R. Shlomo Aviner.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> In Chaim Brody, "Poems of Meshullam ben Shlomo da Piera," *Yediyot HaMachon LeCheker HaShirah HaIvrit* 4 (1938) pp. 33, 55. This and the following sources are taken from Marc Shapiro, *Studies in Maimonides and his Interpreters* (University of Scranton Press 2008), pp. 105-108.

<sup>21</sup> His comment is printed in his translation of Crescas' *Bittul Ikkarei HaNotzrim* p. 93.

<sup>22</sup> *Eilim* (Amsterdam 1628) p. 83.

<sup>23</sup> *Emunas Chachamim* (Warsaw 1888) p. 8a.

<sup>24</sup> Commentary to Deuteronomy 18:9, p. 173.

<sup>25</sup> *Bi'ur ha-Gra, Yoreh De'ab*, 179:6 note 13. Traditionalists are often disturbed by the Gra's declaration that Rambam was "led astray by the accursed philosophy" to deny the existence of demons and other such phenomena. See, for example, Reuven Schmeltzer, *Chaim B'Emunasam*, pp. 290-291. They claim that the Vilna Gaon did not mean to denigrate Rambam himself, and report an account of how the Vilna Gaon spoke highly of the Rambam and wished to share his portion in the World-to-Come; however, this story appears to be nothing more than a folktale, with no authentic basis. See R. Yisrael Yaakov Dinstag, "Was the Gra Opposed to the Philosophical Approach of the Rambam?" [Hebrew], *Talpiot* 4:1-2 (Tammuz 5709) p. 254.

<sup>26</sup> *Shomer Emunim* (Amsterdam 1736) p. 11.

<sup>27</sup> Responsa *Shoel U'Meishiv* (Lvov 1865) 4:87.

<sup>28</sup> *Nishmat Chaim* (Amsterdam 1652) 3:12.

<sup>29</sup> *Mei Menuchos* (Pressburg 1884), pp. 43b.

<sup>30</sup> *She'elot uTeshuvot ve-Chiddushei Rabbi Eliezer Simchah* (Jerusalem 1998), no. 11.

<sup>31</sup> Cited by R. Avraham Noah Klein, et al., *Daf al ha-Daf* (Jerusalem 2006), *Pesachim* 110a.

<sup>32</sup> *Ketavim* (Jerusalem, 1989), vol. 2, pp. 600-601.

<sup>33</sup> I think it would be accurate to say that all those who do not believe that Rambam denied the existence of demons, are themselves people who believe in the existence of demons and who greatly revere Rambam.

<sup>34</sup> Many sources are cited by Shapiro, *Studies in Maimonides and his Interpreters*, pp. 106-111.

<sup>35</sup> R. Tzefanyah Arusi, "Lo ba-Shamayim Hi' be-Mishnat ha-Rambam," *Mesorah le-Yosef* 6 (2009), p. 396, objects to Gra's condemnation of Rambam, asking how he knows that Rambam denied their existence.

<sup>36</sup> *Sichot haRav Tzvi Yehudah: Bereishit*, ed. Aviner (Jerusalem, 1993), pp. 295-297, 310-312.

<sup>37</sup> Letter to Marc Shapiro, at <http://seforim.blogspot.com/2009/10/some-assorted-comments-and-selection.html>.

Rambam's most explicit denial of the existence of demons would seem to be found in his commentary to the Mishnah:

Amongst that which you should know is that the perfected philosophers do not believe in *tzelamim*, by which I mean talismanery, but scoff at them and at those who think that they possess efficacy... and I say this because I know that most people are seduced by this with great folly, and with similar things, and think that they are real—which is not so... and these are things that have received great publicity amongst the pagans, especially amongst the nation which is called the Sabians... and they wrote works dealings with the stars, and witchcraft... and demons, and soothsaying... (Commentary to the Mishnah, *Avodah Zarah* 4:7)

Some claim that this text is only rejecting conversing with demons, rather than rejecting the actual existence of demons per se. However, a careful reading does seem to make it clear that Rambam is saying that demons are not real.<sup>38</sup>

Other evidence for Rambam's denial of demons emerges from his discussion in the *Guide* of the prohibition against eating an animal's blood was due to the belief that doing so has the effect of summoning demons who then become of assistance. In the course of this discussion, he writes as follows:

Know that this belief was widespread in the era of our teacher Moses. Many conducted themselves in accordance with it, and people were seduced by it. You find this written in the song of *Ha'azinu*: "They sacrificed to demons, not to God; to gods that they had never known."<sup>39</sup> The Sages explained the significance of the phrase "not to God," when they said that the people not only worshipped actual beings but even imaginary ones. (*Guide* 3:46)

Further evidence for Rambam's denial of the existence of demons comes from the fact that Rambam consistently either ignore the Talmudic references to demons or reinterprets the statements in such a way as to avoid accepting that demons exist. For example, the Talmud (*Makkot* 6b) refers to the possibility of someone being warned against a crime by a demon (which renders him liable for punishment if he nevertheless continues). But Rambam records this as someone hearing someone warning him but not having seen them.<sup>40</sup> The Talmud (*Berachot* 3a) gives one reason why a person should not enter a ruined building as being due to danger from demons, but Rambam

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<sup>38</sup> Marc Shapiro (ibid.) relates that Dr. Dror Fixler from Yeshivat Birkat Moshe in Maaleh Adumim, who is an expert on Arabic and is working on a new edition of the *Commentary on the Mishnah*, asserts that there is no doubt whatsoever that Maimonides *is* denying the existence of demons here.

<sup>39</sup> Deut. 32:17.

<sup>40</sup> *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Sanhedrin* 12:2.

does not record any reason.<sup>41</sup> The Talmud speaks of Adam giving birth to demons, but Rambam presents this as him giving birth to people who did not refine their intellects.<sup>42</sup> There are countless other such examples.<sup>43</sup>

Other rationalists are likewise seen not to accept the existence of demons. **R. Nissim Gaon** (990-1062), citing R. Sherira Gaon, and commenting on the Midrashic account about Adam giving birth to “spirits, demons and liliths,” describes these as deformed humans.<sup>44</sup> Rambam’s son **R. Avraham** (1186-1237) writes that stories about demons in the Talmud are accounts of events in dreams rather than being intended as descriptions of actual entities, and only a fool would take them in that way.<sup>45</sup> **R. Yaakov b. Abba Mari Anatoli** (c. 1194-1256), the son-in-law of Shmuel Ibn Tibbon and devoted follower of Maimonides, denied the existence of demons and lamented the fact that the majority of Jews, including famous scholars, had their faith corrupted by their belief in such “nonsense.”<sup>46</sup> **R. Levi b. Gershon** (Rabag, 1288–1344) describes satyrs (*se’irim*) as “demons, which are the false images that bring people to believe that something not divine is divine.”<sup>47</sup> Later, he describes the existence of demons as being illusory,<sup>48</sup> and finds support for this in the statement of the Sages that “with one person, a demon may be seen and cause harm, with two it is seen but does not cause harm, and with three it is not seen at all.”<sup>49</sup> Likewise, in his commentary to Averroes’ *Epitome of Parva Naturalia*, Rabag flatly denies the existence of demons.<sup>50</sup> **R. Avraham Bibago** (c. 1446-c. 1489)

<sup>41</sup> *Hilchot Tefillah* 5:6 and *Hilchot Rotzeach* 12:6.

<sup>42</sup> *Guide to the Perplexed* 1:7.

<sup>43</sup> See Shapiro, *Studies in Maimonides and his Interpreters*, pp. 111-134.

<sup>44</sup> R. Nissim Gaon, ed. Shraga Abramson (Jerusalem: Mekiz Nirdamim 1965) p. 112. See José Faur, *Homo Mysticus: A Guide to Maimonides’ Guide for the Perplexed*, p. 127 and p. 231 n. 7.

<sup>45</sup> R. Avraham b. HaRambam, *Ma’amar al Derashot Chazal*.

<sup>46</sup> *Mamad HaTalmidim* (Lek 1866) p. 184a. For a full discussion of R. Yaakov b. Abba Mari Anatoli’s rationalist views, see Isaac Barzilay, *Between Reason and Faith*, pp. 28-32.

<sup>47</sup> Commentary on the Torah, to Leviticus 17:1-7, 158a in Venice 1759 ed. Avraham b. Chaniah Yagel’s understanding of Rabag’s view is discussed by David Ruderman, *Kabbalah, Magic, and Science: The Cultural Universe of a Sixteenth-Century Jewish Physician*, pp. 46-47.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 242b, in *parashat Ha’azinu*.

<sup>49</sup> Babylonian Talmud, *Berachot* 43b.

<sup>50</sup> Alexander Altmann, “Gersonides’ Commentary on Averroes’ *Epitome of Parva Naturalia*,” II. 3 Annotated Critical Edition, *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research*, Vol. 46, Jubilee Volume (1928-29 / 1978-79) [Part 1] (1979 - 1980), p. 10. Averroes himself denied demons, but only implicitly. See Seymour Feldman, *Levi ben Gershom: Wars of the Lord*, vol. II, p. 8, and Moritz Steinschneider, *Die Hebräischen Übersetzungen des Mittelalters und die-Juden als Dolmetscher, etc.* (Berlin, 1893), p. 155, note 353b.



argued that all references to demons can be interpreted as referring to figments of peoples' imagination.<sup>51</sup>

A particularly interesting discussion is found in the writings of **R. Levi ben Avraham ben Chaim** of Villefranche (ca. 1245 - ca. 1315), a Provençal rationalist whose allegorical interpretations of the Torah earned the ire of Rashba.<sup>52</sup> He writes that one of the reasons for the Jewish People's forty-year sojourn in the wilderness was to impress upon them that demons, the alleged inhabitants of the wilderness, do not exist.<sup>53</sup> Demons are merely delusions, to which depressed or anxious people are particularly susceptible. Levi b. Avraham concludes as follows:

An enlightened person should not believe everything he is told, even if the person telling it is a scholar and pious person... one should only believe that which can be sensed, that which can be comprehended, and that which is accepted from our prophets and sages. (p. 769; a similar formulation is found in Rambam's *Letter to the Sages of Montpellier*)

We have here an initial outline of a rationalist approach ("one should only believe that which can be sensed"), followed by an acceptance of a dogmatist approach ("and that which is accepted from our prophets and sages"). However, matters are a little more complicated, since demons were certainly an accepted tradition from the Sages, and yet Levi b. Avraham reinterpreted the Sages' words so as not to accept their existence. Of course Levi b. Avraham thought that he was presenting the true meaning of the Sages' words, and one can only speculate what he would have said if he would have realized that the Sages did indeed believe in demons—would he have then accepted their existence, or would he have decided that the Sages were mistaken? We shall discuss this further in the conclusion.

**R. Menachem Meiri** (1249–c.1310) does not categorically deny the existence of demons. Yet, commenting on the verse, "The fool believes everything" (Prov. 14:15), he states that the question of the existence of demons is to be determined by

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<sup>51</sup> In *Derech Emunah* 2:2, as referenced by Menashe b. Yisrael in *Nishmat Chaim*.

<sup>52</sup> For more on Levi b. Avraham, his approach, and its reception, see *Eichut HaNevuah VeSodot HaTorah: Livyat Chen* (ed. Chaim Kreisel, Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies 2004), introduction; Abraham S. Halkin, "Why Was Levi ben Hayyim Hounded?" in *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 34 (1966), pp. 65-76; Warren Harvey, "Levi ben Abraham of Villefranche's Controversial Encyclopedia," *The Medieval Hebrew Encyclopedias of Science and Philosophy*, ed. Steven Harvey (Dordrecht 2000) pp. 171-188; Howard Kreisel, "Reasons for the Commandments in Maimonides Guide for the Perplexed and in Provençal Jewish Philosophy," *Maimonidean Studies*, vol. 5, pp. 159-188.

<sup>53</sup> Levi Ben Avraham, *Eichut HaNevuah VeSodot HaTorah: Livyat Chen* (Ed. Chaim Kreisel, Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies 2004) pp. 764-770.

investigation rather than acceptance based on authority.<sup>54</sup> And following the approach of Rambam, he interprets Talmudic discussions about demons in a way that avoids them being understood as actual entities.<sup>55</sup> Meiri explains the Talmudic statements about demonic harm with even numbers as being aimed at helping with psychosomatic problems rather than addressing an objective reality.<sup>56</sup> He interprets the account of how reciting the bedtime *Shema* wards off demons as referring to the driving away of false and evil thoughts.<sup>57</sup> And in discussing the Mishnah's account of how *mazikim* were created at the eve of the first Shabbat, he first explains them as "things that are not found naturally," and later gives his own preferred explanation that it refers to the evil inclination.<sup>58</sup> He also refers to "those who believe in the existence of demons," implying that he himself was not one of them.<sup>59</sup>

The position of **Avraham Ibn Ezra** (1089-1164) with regard to demons is difficult to determine, and has been the subject of dispute:

- The tosafist R. Moshe Taku reports Ibn Ezra as writing that "there are certainly no demons in this world."<sup>60</sup> He continues to claim that Ibn Ezra erred greatly, and recounts that Ibn Ezra ironically died in London as a result of demons, in the guise of black dogs, which stared at him and caused him to fall sick. However, aside from there being no such known record of this fate befalling Ibn Ezra, the text that R. Taku quotes from is also unknown.
- Levi b. Avraham explains that the Torah prohibits belief in demons and related matters due to their being fraudulent,<sup>61</sup> and notes that Ibn Ezra likewise writes regarding necromancy that "the Torah does not prohibit truth, only falsehood."<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> *Sefer HaMiddot LeHaMeiri* (ed. Menachem Mendel Meshi-Zahav, Jerusalem 1966), p. 100.

<sup>55</sup> See Louis Jacobs, "Demythologizing the Rabbinic Aggadah: Menahem Meiri." For discussion of Meiri's general stance regarding magic and superstitions, see Shapiro, *Studies in Maimonides and his Interpreters*, pp. 147-148.

<sup>56</sup> Commentary to *Pesachim* 109b.

<sup>57</sup> Commentary to *Berachot* 4b.

<sup>58</sup> Commentary to *Avot* 5:8.

<sup>59</sup> Commentary to *Sanhedrin* 101a, s.v. *Sheratzim*.

<sup>60</sup> R. Moshe Taku, *Ketav Tamim*, p. 97.

<sup>61</sup> Levi Ben Avraham, *Eichut HaNevuah VeSodot HaTorah: Livyat Chen* (ed. Chaim Kreisel, Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies 2004) pp. 767-768.

<sup>62</sup> Ibn Ezra to Leviticus 19:31. Ramban (*Derashot Torat HaShem Temimah*) criticizes Ibn Ezra for this.

- Avraham b. Chananiah Yagel, on the other hand, claims that Ibn Ezra accepted the existence of demons.<sup>63</sup> As his first evidence, he cites *Sefer Ha-Azanim*, which was attributed to Ibn Ezra. This work gives an unusual definition of demons, describing them as being formed when emanations from the constellations collide with vapor and smoke ascending from earth, and enter people with melancholic and fearful dispositions. However, while *Sefer Ha-Azanim* was formerly attributed to Ibn Ezra, and was the cause of several Jewish philosophers deciding to accept the existence of demons according to its description,<sup>64</sup> its authorship is actually unknown. Yagel also cites Ibn Ezra's commentary to Job 1:6, which refers to the Satan and angels as autonomous beings, but this is inconclusive.

Other evidence regarding Ibn Ezra's position relates to the goat that is sent to Azazel.<sup>65</sup> In his commentary on this topic, Ibn Ezra writes as follows:

Now if you can understand the secret of the word after Azazel, you will know its secret and the secret of its name, since it has parallels in the Scriptures. And I will reveal to you part of the secret by hint: when you will be thirty-three, you will know it.

The hint tells us to count 33 verses from this verse, bringing us to Leviticus 17:7: "they may offer their sacrifices no more to the *se'irim*." Ramban, who explains this to mean that Ibn Ezra considered Azazel to be a demon, notes that this is not an especially concealed secret, since Chazal state this in a number of places. However, this is still not clear proof that Ibn Ezra understood Azazel or the *se'irim* to be actual demons. Furthermore, Abarbanel refers to a different version of Ibn Ezra's commentary in which he defines Azazel as a heavenly constellation.<sup>66</sup> If we look at Ibn Ezra's commentary to the verse that is 33 verses later, matters are still complicated:

**To *se'irim*:** They are the demons (*shedim*) and are called this because the body which sees them trembles (*yishta'er*). And a close [second explanation] is that the crazy people see them in the form of goats... **After whom they go astray:** For anyone who seeks them out, and believes in them, he is straying from after his

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<sup>63</sup> See David Ruderman, *Kabbalah, Magic, and Science: The Cultural Universe of a Sixteenth-Century Jewish Physician*, p. 47.

<sup>64</sup> See Dov Schwartz, *Astrologia u-Magia beHagut HaYehudim* (Astral Magic in Medieval Jewish Thought), pp. 196-199.

<sup>65</sup> For extensive discussion, see Aron Pinker, "A Goat to go to Azazel," *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* (2007) vol. 7 pp. 2-25.

<sup>66</sup> See Abarbanel's seventh question in his commentary on the Torah.

God, that he thinks that there is one who can make things good or bad aside from the Honored and Awesome God. (Commentary to Leviticus 17:7)

Ibn Ezra might mean here that demons are only a delusion of crazy people, and that is why someone who “seeks them out and believing them” is going astray.<sup>67</sup> On the other hand, he might be saying that demons are real, albeit not possessing any power independent of God, and that they are perceived by crazy people as looking goatlike, even though that is not their true appearance (or perhaps only crazy people can actually see them).<sup>68</sup> In conclusion, then, it is difficult to determine what Ibn Ezra believed about demons.

## Medieval and Early Modern Believers in Demons

There is no point in citing all those in Jewish history who accepted the existence of demons; since the Talmud speaks of demons, obviously there are countless Jews who likewise believed that they exist.<sup>69</sup> This led to various authorities discussing questions such as the status with regard to a person who has intercourse with a demon,<sup>70</sup> and the permissibility of appeasing demons.<sup>71</sup> What is relevant to our investigation is to cite those who gave an extensive presentation of demonology, and especially to cite those who saw fit to *justify* their belief in the existence of demons—who were aware that some denied their existence, and sought to explain why this view was wrong.

The first person to acknowledge those who denied the existence of demons was **R. Yehudah HaLevi** (c.1075–1141):

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<sup>67</sup> Possibly Ibn Ezra was referring to the followers of Muhammed, who was known in medieval Jewish literature from Islamic lands as “the crazy one,” and who saw djinns (demons) as monstrous, hairy creatures that lived in ruins and desert places (the *Jewish Encyclopedia* notes that “the association of monstrous beings with ruins and desert places is still a prevalent element in the folklore of Arabia and Syria; and the Arabian jinn also are represented as having monstrous hairy forms”).

<sup>68</sup> It has also been claimed that Ibn Ezra interpreted the word Meriri, which appears in Deuteronomy 32:24 and Iyov 3:5, as being the name of a demon; see Scott B. Noegel, “Job iii 5 in the Light of Mesopotamian Demons of Time,” *Vetus Testamentum* 57 (2007), p. 561. However, while Rashi interpreted Meriri in this way, I have not been able to find this being stated by Ibn Ezra.

<sup>69</sup> A survey of medieval demonology can be found in Dan Ben-Amos, “On Demons,” in *Creation and Re-Creation in Jewish Thought*, ed. Rachel Elior and Peter Schäfer (Tübingen, 2005), pp. 27–37.

<sup>70</sup> R. Yitzchak of Vienna (1200-1270), *Ohr Zarua; Beit Shmuel to Shulhan Aruch, Even haEzer* 6:17; R. Benzion Uziel, *Mishpetei Uziel, Mahadurah Tinyana, Even ha-Ezer* 11. See Hannah Sprecher, “Diabolus Ex-Machina: An Unusual Case of Yuhasin” in *Jewish Law Association Studies VIII: The Jerusalem Conference Volume*, pp. 183-204; and J. H. Chajes, *Between Worlds: Dybbuks, Exorcists, and Early Modern Judaism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 2003).

<sup>71</sup> R. Menashe Stathon, *Knessiah Leshem Shamaim* (Jerusalem 1874). The entire work discusses (and condemns) a prevalent procedure of appeasing demons on behalf of a sick or childless person,

The Rabbi: I feared that you would be deceived, and acquiesce in the views (of the philosophers). Because they furnish mathematical and logical proofs, people accept everything they say concerning physics and metaphysics, taking every word as evidence... Why is it difficult for you to accept... the accounts of the Sages regarding demons, and the aggadot regarding events to be expected during the Messianic era, the resurrection of the dead and the world to come? Why do we need to bring philosophical arguments for the continued existence of the soul after the destruction of the body, seeing as it has already been verified by our tradition... If you would attempt to confirm or refute these views logically, it would take a lifetime and you would not reach a conclusion. (*Kuzari* 5:14)

While HaLevi fought against the philosophical approach, he himself was educated in it and used the tools of philosophy to combat it. But in arguing against those who do not accept the existence of demons, he had little to say other than insisting upon the reliability of tradition and the futility of philosophical speculation.

A similar discussion is found in *Ketav Tamim* by the thirteenth century tosafist **R. Moshe Taku**. He condemns those who do not believe in demons as part of a general polemic against the philosophic approach, and insists that we should rely upon the Sages of the Talmud, who clearly believed in their existence.<sup>72</sup> As mentioned earlier, R. Taku claims that Ibn Ezra denied demons and was killed by demonic dogs.

**Ramban** (1194-1270) discusses demons in numerous places. He considers the term *sheidim* to be synonymous with *ruchot*,<sup>73</sup> *mazikim*,<sup>74</sup> and the Scriptural term *se'irim*.<sup>75</sup> He describes them as being produced by witchcraft and possessing bodies composed of air that cannot be detected,<sup>76</sup> along with the element of fire.<sup>77</sup> Since they are composed of these light elements, they are able to fly,<sup>78</sup> and since they travel in the sky, they are able to learn about future events from the angels of the constellations.<sup>79</sup> Ramban also explains Chazal's statement about demons eating like people<sup>80</sup> to mean that they also subsist on food—although theirs consists of evaporated moisture and smoke from

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<sup>72</sup> *Ketav Tamim* p. 97.

<sup>73</sup> Commentary to Exodus 20:3

<sup>74</sup> Commentary to Leviticus 16:8.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid* and Commentary to Leviticus 17:7.

<sup>76</sup> Commentary to Exodus 7:11.

<sup>77</sup> Commentary to Leviticus 17:7.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>79</sup> Commentary to Leviticus 17:7.

<sup>80</sup> Babylonian Talmud, *Chagigah* 16a.

fires.<sup>81</sup> Ramban notes that some demons are assigned to various nations, “as is known from the wisdom of necromancy.”<sup>82</sup>

Most significantly, Ramban views the denial of the existence of demons as signifying a general heretical worldview. He proclaims that the miracles attested to in Scripture, whether performed by God or by Pharaoh’s magicians, oppose Aristotle’s concept of the eternal universe, in which nothing in the natural order can ever change. But he expands the concept of the supernatural to include demons:

And from here you see the cruelty of the head of the philosophers and his obstinacy, may his name be erased! For he denies several things that many people have seen, and the truth of which we have seen, and which have been publicized in the world. And in the earlier times, such as in the days of our master Moses, these were known to all, for the wisdom in that generation was all with regard to spiritual matters, such as matters involving demons and witches... but when the Greeks arose, a new nation that did not inherit wisdom... that man arose and did not believe anything that could not be detected, and sought after empirical sciences, and denied the realm of the spiritual. And he said that demons and witchcraft are emptiness, and that there are only natural forces in the world.<sup>83</sup> But it is known and publicized that this is not so... (*Derashat Torat Hashem Temimah*, in *Kitvei Ramban*, ed. H. D. Chavel, vol. I, pp. 147, 149)

Ramban was not averse to admitting that the Sages may have on occasion been mistaken about the natural world.<sup>84</sup> However, the denial of demons was part of an Aristotelian worldview that was fundamentally incompatible with Judaism. In the words of Jose Faur, “By denying belief in demons and the realm of the spiritistic (*ruchnios*), the Maimonideans were in fact rejecting the grounds of religion. This is why

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<sup>81</sup> Commentary to Leviticus 17:7.

<sup>82</sup> Commentary to Exodus 20:3.

<sup>83</sup> In fact, Aristotle’s position regarding demons is unclear, and historically there has been much dispute about it. In 1580, the Aristotelian philosopher Andrea Cesalpino published *An Aristotelian Investigation of Demons* in which he sought to argue that Aristotle did indeed accept their existence. Aristotle describes a class of beings that live in fire, which are interpreted by some as demons; he also writes that dreams emanate from the demonic realm (see Arthur Hilary Armstrong, *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy*, p. 34 note 1). On the other hand, the Aristotelian philosopher Pietro Pomponazzi (d. 1525) presented cogent arguments that Aristotle did not believe in the existence of demons, Thomas Aquinas had already noted with regret that Aristotelian philosophy did not admit the existence of demons, and Agostino Steuco (d. 1548) likewise accepted that Aristotle denied the existence of demons, even though he criticized him for it (see Walter Stephens, *Demon Lovers: Witchcraft, Sex, and the Crisis of Belief*, pp. 76-80).

<sup>84</sup> Commentary to Leviticus 12:2.

their teaching represents the rankest of all heresies.”<sup>85</sup> Yet, even given the fundamental religious nature of the necessity of believing in the occult, Ramban did not solely justify it on religious grounds; he also repeatedly stressed that there is eyewitness testimony for it.<sup>86</sup> Unlike R. Yehudah HaLevi and R. Moshe Taku, Ramban thus invoked rationalist considerations for his mystical conclusions.

Ramban’s disciple, **R. Shlomo b. Aderes** (Rashba, 1235-1310) is usually presented as someone who was sharply opposed to the rationalist approach of the philosophers. But a study of his long responsum discussing supernatural remedies (and the supernatural in general) reveals that this description is far too simplistic.<sup>87</sup> True, he insists on the reality of magic and demons. But he does not simply invoke the authority of the Sages for this. Rashba argues that it is undeniable that not all phenomena in the universe are part of the scientific order that can be grasped by man. He presents the magnet as an example of such a phenomenon which is not part of the ordinary natural order and yet clearly exists, following its own rules. Unlike his teacher Ramban, he does not simply argue that supernatural phenomena are empirically proven; he also seeks to incorporate them into a scientific classification of the universe as a class called *teva ha-mesugal*, which is intermediate between the fully natural and the utterly supernatural (acts of God).<sup>88</sup>

A disciple of Rashba, **R. Bachya b. Asher** (d. 1340) quotes the Sages as identifying Tuval Kain’s wife Na’amah as the mother of Ashmodai and other demons, along with Lilith, Igroth, and Machalat.<sup>89</sup> He points out that Adam HaRishon likewise fathered demons, and notes that it is part of man’s special and elevated nature that he is capable of such things.<sup>90</sup> Quoting the Midrash that demons had to be saved along with the animals in Noah’s Ark,<sup>91</sup> he describes demons as animate beings, found in the atmosphere, that move by flying.<sup>92</sup> Elsewhere, he divides demons into three categories—those that live in the atmosphere and cause nightmares, those that live

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<sup>85</sup> Faur, “Anti-Maimonidean Demons” p 47.

<sup>86</sup> See also Ramban’s Commentary to Deuteronomy 18:9.

<sup>87</sup> Responsa HaRashba 413.

<sup>88</sup> See *Rashba’s Ma’amar al Yishmael shechibber ha-Datot*, in *R. Salomo b. Abraham b. Adereth: Sein Leben und seine Schriften* (Schletter, 1863), p. 11 in the Hebrew section, and the discussion by David Horwitz, “Rashba’s Attitude to Science and its Limits,” *The Torah u-Madda Journal* vol. 3 (1991-92) pp. 59-60 and 76-77.

<sup>89</sup> To Genesis 4:22.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Midrash Bereishit Rabbah 31:13.

<sup>92</sup> To Genesis 6:19.

amongst people and cause sin, and, following the Midrash, those that are restrained in the depths of the oceans.<sup>93</sup> Following Ramban's lead, he also states that, as creatures that are formed from fire and air and live in the atmosphere, demons are able to learn about future events from the angels of the constellations, just as birds do, and they subsist on evaporated moisture and smoke from fires.<sup>94</sup> But unlike Ramban or Rashba, R. Bachya sees no reason to ever justify his belief in the existence of demons, and makes no claims about eyewitness testimony to their existence. In contrast to R. Bachya's lack of concern with opposing views is **Meir b. Yitzchak Aldabi**, a 14<sup>th</sup> century writer, who goes into some detail regarding the nature of demons, and explains that he is doing this because some of the nation, who were engaged in philosophy, denied the existence of demons.<sup>95</sup>

Amongst the Jewish philosophers, we find only two figures who believed in the existence of demons. In the beginning of a chapter dedicated to demons,<sup>96</sup> **R. Chasdai Crescas** (1340-1410) argues that their existence is made clear in Scripture and in the words of the Sages, as well as experientially demonstrated. He notes that they possess four characteristics: knowledge of the future, the desire for people to serve them in exchange for granting wishes, the desire for evil, and the ability to suddenly take on human form. After discussing these aspects in some detail, he concludes by noting that "these matters are hidden, and the gates of investigation are virtually locked; therefore we should not depart from the tradition of the Sages, who said that they have certain aspects in which they are similar to ministering angels and certain aspects in which they are similar to people."

The second philosopher to believe in demons was Crescas' student **R. Yosef Albo** (c. 1380–1444). He notes that the heathens worship them in order to find out about their future, and states that this is forbidden due to it emanating from the side of impurity—not due to its lack of efficacy. He adds that non-Jews resort to this because they think that there is no way for a human being to attain knowledge of the future, yet God promised prophets for the Jewish People who can accomplish this.<sup>97</sup>

**Shem Tov ibn Shem Tov** (Spain, c. 1390-c. 1440), a kabbalist who fiercely opposed rationalistic philosophy, introduces one chapter of his work with the announcement that it will serve to strengthen belief in the simple meaning of Scriptural

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<sup>93</sup> To Exodus 20:4, based on *Mechilta, Yisro*.

<sup>94</sup> To Leviticus 17:7.

<sup>95</sup> *Shevilei Emunah, Netiv haTishi*, p. 178

<sup>96</sup> *Ohr Hashem* (Pirara 1555) 3:3:6.

<sup>97</sup> *Sefer Halkkarim* 3:8.



verses and the words of the Sages with regard to the existence of demons and sorcery. His method of doing so, however, is to emphasize how Scripture and the Sages attest to their reality.<sup>98</sup>

**R. Yitzchak Abarbanel** (Lisbon, 1437-Venice, 1508), in his commentary to the verses dealing with sorcery records the dispute between Rambam and Ramban, and argues that Rambam's denial of the reality of such things is decisively disproved in several ways—by the Torah's description of people worshipping demons, and by the tradition of the Sages who accepted their reality.<sup>99</sup> Of course, Rambam himself held that the Torah is not attesting to demons being actual entities, and that the Sages were simply mistaken—which are points that Abarbanel does not address.

On the other hand, in his commentary to the Haggadah, Abarbanel is critical of the explanation (which he attributes to the Sages “by way of *derush*”) that *Ha lachma anya* is recited in Aramaic in order that the demons should not hear the invitation to come and eat. Abarbanel states that

this explanation is questionable on numerous levels—first with regard to the very existence of demons, second that they would understand Hebrew but not Aramaic, and third that even if we acknowledge the existence of demons, which is difficult, and a heavy burden of belief... surely those involved in a mitzvah cannot be harmed. (*Seder Haggadah shel Pesach - Zevach Pesach Shvilei haLeket* (Lodz, 1936) p. 26)

This is not an absolute denial of the existence of demons, but it is demonstrative of skepticism and of the strain involved for a worldly figure such as Abarbanel, intimately familiar with the philosophical approach of Rambam, to accept their existence. Furthermore, in his commentary to *Avot*, Abarbanel seems to give a metaphorical explanation of the demons that are said to have been created in the first week of Creation and from Adam's seed, apparently explaining them to be harmful sins rather than entities.<sup>100</sup> This also demonstrates his reluctance to accept their reality, notwithstanding his professed subservience to the Sages having done so.

This kind of difficulty involved in accepting the existence of demons is found amongst others in the sixteenth century. **R. Eliezer Ashkenazi** (1513-1586) admits that he is somewhat skeptical regarding the existence of demons, which cannot be detected by the senses. However, he acknowledges that the sages believed in their

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<sup>98</sup> *Sefer Ha-Emunot* (Ferrara 1556) 5:1.

<sup>99</sup> Commentary to Deuteronomy, *parashat Shoftim* 18:9, pp. 173 — 174.

<sup>100</sup> *Nachalat Avot* (New York 1953), commentary to *Avot* 5:6 (p. 332).

existence, and is very much taken by accounts of demonic possession. He therefore suggests a “scientific” way of explaining their existence—they consist of a fine substance that formerly existed within the bodies of evil people that died, and which can subsequently take on the form of both people and animals.<sup>101</sup>

**Avraham b. Chananiah Yagel** (Italy 1553-1623), a kabbalist, physician and naturalist, likewise grappled with the question of the existence of demons, acknowledging that some of the great philosophers did not believe in any such occult matters and argued that there is no rational explanation for them. But, Yagel claims, there is such overwhelming eyewitness testimony for these phenomena, as well as a vast range of authorities—rabbinic, kabbalistic, and non-Jewish—who attest to their existence, that the only reasonable conclusion is that demons must indeed exist. He even attempts to offer a “scientific” explanation of their existence, based—ironically—upon Aristotelian causes.<sup>102</sup> This kind of investigation into their nature had been performed a century earlier in Italy by **R. Ovadiah Seforno** (1475-1550), who was somewhat involved in philosophy and opposed to mysticism, but nevertheless considered demons to be real entities. He writes that it is appropriate to contemplate their nature, and argues that since they are invisible and yet eat, their food must be of a very fine nature. He concludes that they eat the “vapor” of blood.<sup>103</sup>

**R. Yosef Shlomo Delmedigo** (1591-1655, also known as Yashar MiCandia), possessed a strong rationalist tendency, accepting Copernicus’ revolutionary understanding of the cosmos and demonstrating a sharp skepticism of many popular beliefs. Taking a similar position to R. Eliezer Ashkenazi, while he did not affirm the existence of demons, he did not rule it out either:

With regard to the wondrous properties attributed to minerals, herbs and creatures, few are genuine. Who can believe that the remora, a small fish of a handspan in length, can stop a boat from moving?<sup>104</sup> Or that a diamond can

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<sup>101</sup> *Maasei Hashem* (Venice 1583) p. 5a. For discussion, see Ruderman, *Kabbalah, Magic and Science*, p. 55, and Jeffrey Howard Chajes, *Between Worlds: Dybbuks, Exorcists, and Early Modern Judaism*, pp. 11-12.

<sup>102</sup> For a lengthy discussion, see David Ruderman, *Kabbalah, Magic and Science: The Cultural Universe of a Sixteenth-Century Jewish Physician*, pp. 43-55.

<sup>103</sup> Seforno to Leviticus 17:7.

<sup>104</sup> This capability was widely attributed to the remora in antiquity. See Eugene W. Gudger, “The Myth of the Ship-holder: Studies in Echeneis or Remora I,” *Annals and Magazine of Natural History* 9:2 pp. 271-307, and Brian P. Copenhaver, “A Tale of Two Fishes: Magical Objects in Natural History from Antiquity through the Scientific Revolution,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 52:3 (July-September 1991) pp. 373-9.

neutralize a magnet's attraction of iron? And there are books full of many such nonsensical things. I have heard so many of them, and have witnessed so few to be true, that I decided not to validate and mention anything other than that which I have examined and tested several times. But that which I have not examined, or which I have not witnessed, I shall neither validate nor deny, and I shall not mention it at all; for example, magic, sorcery, demons and suchlike, which I have not seen from Egypt to here—and there (in Egypt) they say that they are found in the extreme north, and here they say that they are found in Egypt and Babylon—and therefore I shall not deal with them. It is true that from the words of the Torah, there is no determination; for those who deny them say that the verse, “they slaughter to the demons, not to gods” (Deut. 32:17) means to say that they can neither harm nor help, since they are nothing and emptiness, and that which it states, “that they did not know” (ibid.) means that they did not know of them from seeing or sensing them, only from hearsay... and as I mentioned, I have never seen them, even though I have seen many countries and have travelled through wilderness and forest. But nevertheless, I shall not conclude that since I have not seen them, there is no such thing; for there are many thousands more things that are concealed from us than that are known to us. All the more so is it fitting to pay respect to the Sages of the Talmud, the kabbalists and the Platonists, who tell many stories of them. And I do not say this in order to curry favor with those who believe in them... for these things are not of the fundamentals of faith, and if it was clear to me that they do not exist, I would publicize it. (*Sefer Elim* p. 83)

While some have claimed that Delmedigo was speaking somewhat sarcastically, and that he completely rejected the existence of demons,<sup>105</sup> others point out that there is no reason not to take him at face value, especially in light of similar statements from people such as R. Avraham Yagel.<sup>106</sup> In seventeenth century Europe, there was little reason not to believe in demons; it is perfectly understandable for Delmedigo to temper his skeptical inclination with an acknowledgement that demons may well exist and that respected sages attest to their existence.

**R. Menashe ben Yisrael** (Portugal/ Netherlands/ Brazil 1604-1657), writes that since many prohibitions in the Torah are based on the existence of demons, he will prove their existence in three ways—by way of tradition, the intellect, and the senses.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Isaac Barzilay, *Yoseph Shlomo Delmedigo, Yashar of Candia: His Life, Works and Times*, pp. 260-262.

<sup>106</sup> David Ruderman, *Jewish Thought and Scientific Discovery in Early Modern Europe*, pp. 142-143.

<sup>107</sup> *Nishmat Chaim* 3:12. For an extensive discussion of Menashe b. Yisrael's views, see Jeffrey Howard Chajes, *Between Worlds: Dybbuks, Exorcists, and Early Modern Judaism*, pp. 126-140.

He begins with a lengthy list of citations from Scripture, Talmud, Midrash, and Zohar, as well as from many Rishonim, all affirming the existence of demons. He admits that Rambam was opposed to their existence, but dismisses him as having been negatively influenced by Aristotle's philosophy. R. Menashe then moves to intellectual arguments for the existence of demons.<sup>108</sup> Observing that the elements of earth and water produce life (animals and fish), he argues that the elements of fire and air, which are closer to the all-important spheres of the heavens, should certainly generate life. Finally, moving to the lack of empirical detection of demons, he first points out that God is also not detectable by the senses, yet is known to exist from His actions; he also notes that the wind, too, is not visible. Then he moves to a lengthy listing of six categories of empirical evidence for demons: stories of demonic possession, demons teaching people knowledge that they could not otherwise have known, demons causing infants to speak shortly after birth, demons having intercourse with women, oracles foretelling the future by way of demons, and demons preventing grooms from consummating their union with their brides.<sup>109</sup>

The kabbalist **R. Avraham b. Mordechai Azulai** (Fez-Hebron 1570 - 1643) presents an extensive discussion of many aspects of demonology.<sup>110</sup> But unlike his contemporaries from Italy and such places, he makes no reference whatsoever to those who deny the existence of demons, nor does he display any urge to demonstrate their reality. **R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto** (Ramchal, Italy-Amsterdam-Acre 1707-1746) likewise discusses the nature of demons without any arguments to prove their existence.<sup>111</sup>

As noted earlier, **R. Eliyahu of Vilna** (1720-1797) condemned Rambam for being "led astray by the accursed philosophy" to deny the reality of magic, spells, amulets and demons.<sup>112</sup> The Vilna Gaon rejects this viewpoint on the grounds that the Talmud extensively discusses such things, and argues that it cannot be interpreted allegorically. He also notes that "everyone" who came after the Rambam disagreed with him. His rebuttal of Rambam thus consists of an appeal to the authority of the Talmud and the rabbinic tradition.

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<sup>108</sup> *Nishmat Chaim* 3:13.

<sup>109</sup> *Nishmat Chaim* 3:14-18,

<sup>110</sup> *Chesed le-Avraham*, (Amsterdam 1685, reprint Lvov 1860), *Ma'ayan Shishi*, *Ein Ganim*, *Nahar* 1, pp. 42a in Lvov edition; *Maayan Shevii*, *Ein Gedi*, *Nahar* 14-25, 46b-49b in Lvov edition.

<sup>111</sup> *Derech Hashem*, *Maamar Ha-Ikarim* 2.

<sup>112</sup> *Bi'ur ha-Gra*, *Yoreh De'ah*, 179:6 note 13.

## Modern Discomfort with Demons

In the wider world, belief in demons and witches had largely died out by the early eighteenth century. This was probably largely due to the acceptance of Newton's mechanical universe, in which natural causes explained all the diverse phenomena in the world.<sup>113</sup> In the Jewish world, this put all but the most insulated of rabbinic scholars in a difficult position. **R. Solomon Judah Löb Rapoport** (Galicia-Prague 1790—1867), one of the founders of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* movement, evinced great discomfort with Talmudic discussions of occult phenomena. He claimed that Aggadot describing these were later insertions, pointing to the scarcity of such material in the Jerusalem Talmud as evidence that the Sages did not subscribe to such beliefs.<sup>114</sup> With regard to demons, he claimed that there were people with evil natures, and others who were skilled at illusions, who were metaphorically described as demons and were subsequently believed by many to actually be demons.<sup>115</sup>

**R. Zvi Hirsch Chajes** (Galicia 1805-1855), who was familiar with R. Rapoport's work, took an approach that was more rational in terms of an honest reading of what the Talmud intended, but less rationalistic in terms of apparently accepting demons as real entities:

Concerning the subject of demons, the evil eye, and the evil spirits referred to in the Talmud, there can be no doubt that the Rabbis believed in their existence, and consequently we should not attempt to offer other interpretations which will explain them in a sense remote from the literal... We do, however, observe a substantial difference in regard to this matter between the Babylonian and the Palestinian sages, although both believed in the existence of these beings and both tell us of conversations which they held with them, and of the marvelous things which these demons sometimes performed... Yet these Palestinian sages did not elaborate these tales at such inordinate length as is done in the Babylonian Talmud, where they are told with great detail. (*Mevo HaTalmud: The Students Guide through the Talmud*, Zvi Hirsch Chajes, translated by Jacob Shachter. Chapter 31, page 233)

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<sup>113</sup> Darren Oldridge, *Strange Histories*, p. 93.

<sup>114</sup> *Erech Milin* (Prague 1852), *Aggadab*, p. 10.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, *Ashmodai*, pp. 242-251.

While R. Chajes does not explicitly affirm that demons must therefore exist, this seems to be the inference.<sup>116</sup> However, he makes no attempt to rationalize this belief. **R. Samson Raphael Hirsch** (Germany, 1808-1888), on the other hand, basing himself on the Rishonim rather than the Talmud, claims that the question of the existence of demons is a long-standing dispute with which one can take whichever side one chooses:

A related topic is the question of the nature of magic, astrology, demons, and suchlike... Who dares get involved in a dispute between Rambam and Ramban, following whom the camp of Israel is split in two on such matters? ...And if so, every intelligent person is entitled to adopt either view in the absence of either being ruled out. Alternatively—and in my view, this is the more correct approach—he can admit that he has no clarity in the matters.

And I will admit without shame that I have never bothered to investigate and analyze the nature of these things, just as I have never been curious to investigate and inquire as to the nature of the World-to-Come, the world of the resurrection, and so on. For the truth of these things is concealed from everyone, and it is impossible to attain clarity on these things with decisive proofs... What difference does it make if with regard to matters of witchcraft and suchlike, the truth lies with Rambam or Ramban? Either way, we have to distance ourselves from such things, whether they are genuine or nonsensical. (Letter to R. Hile Wechsler, published by Mordechai Breuer in *Hama'ayan* 16:2 (Tevet 5736/1976) p. 6)

Many (on both sides of the issue) would dispute R. Hirsch's claim that there is no way to determine whether Rambam or Ramban was correct. Traditionalists would point to testimony, or the body of rabbinic authority, to rule in favor of Ramban, while rationalists would argue that our increased knowledge of the world renders belief in demons unnecessary, and our understanding of how beliefs are formed accounts for all those who did believe in demons. (Interestingly, R. Hirsch does not take such a non-committal approach with regard to the question of the Sages' knowledge of science; in the same letter, he is content to definitively state that the Sages did not possess any special knowledge of natural phenomena, and to accept that the science of his day appeared to have proven them incorrect on various matters.) Furthermore, the question of whether Rambam or Ramban was correct is indeed of significance, in light of the numerous laws and practices which are based on the presupposition of the reality of such things.

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<sup>116</sup> See Bruria Hutner David, "The Dual Role of Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Chajes: Traditionalist and Maskil." Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University (1971) pp. 218-221.

An extensive and intricate discussion regarding the supernatural in general, and demons in particular, is to be found in *Mei Menuchos* by **R. Eliezer Lipman Neusatz** of Magendorf (c. 1797-1858), a disciple of Chasam Sofer.<sup>117</sup> He begins by adopting and elaborating upon Rambam's view, stressing at length that magic, demons and so on have no objective reality and are all figments of people's imagination. He admits that Ramban countered that one cannot deny all the eyewitness testimony, but humbly points out that people can easily be deceived by illusionists. R. Neusatz then goes further, insisting that Chazal must also have known that these phenomena are not real. This raises obvious questions regarding countless statements of Chazal which appear to accept the existence of such phenomena, to which R. Neusatz proposes several possible solutions. His preferred solution to the majority of cases is that Chazal were simply catering to the superstitious beliefs of the masses, explaining that there may have been positive benefits to such beliefs. He also suggests that some of Chazal did actually believe in the reality of such supernatural phenomena. Another argument that he makes is that many aggados dealing with these phenomena are likely to be later, non-authoritative additions from the post-Talmudic period.<sup>118</sup> Finally, several pages later, R. Neusatz backtracks somewhat; he states that there are real demons, formed from the lighter elements of fire and air and intermediate between man and angels, which were occasionally miraculously revealed to the Sages.

Although it does not appear that **R. Avraham Yitzchak Kook** (1865–1935) ever explicitly stated his view regarding whether or not demons exist, in numerous places he explains references to demons (such as Azazel of Scripture as well as Talmudic references) as speaking about evil and wild aspects of human nature.<sup>119</sup> This would indicate that he did not consider them to be real entities. However it remains unclear as to whether he thought that the Torah and the sages likewise did not consider them to be real entities, or if he was consciously providing a new interpretation of ancient practices and beliefs.

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<sup>117</sup> *Mei Menuchos* (Pressburg 1884), pp. 39a-46b. Chasam Sofer referred to R. Neusatz as his “son, pupil and bracelet” in his 1839 approbation to his book *Betzir Eli'ezer*; Kesav Sofer called him “the one of a kind and unique” of Chasam Sofer's disciples.

<sup>118</sup> In this context, he notes that Chasam Sofer told many of his disciples that the vast majority of the Zohar was not authored by R. Shimon bar Yochai and was added by later writers. Chasam Sofer himself wrote an oblique but unequivocal statement to that effect in Responsa Chatam Sofer 6:59, s.v. *Uma SheKatav SheHaRav*.

<sup>119</sup> *Olat Re'iyah* vol. II p. 357; *Shemonah Kevatzim* IV:91, V:193; *Orot HaKodesh* vol. I, p. 226; *Ein Eyah* vol. II, p. 279. See R. Yitzchak Blau, “Demons in the Talmud,” at <http://www.vbm-torah.org/archive/-aggada/18aggada.htm>.

**R. Ahron Soloveitchik** (1917-2001) claimed that all references to demons in the Talmud actually refer to invisible forces such as germs and mental delusions.<sup>120</sup> He further claims that this is in accordance with Rambam's view. But whereas Rambam indeed explained many passages of the Talmud in this way, he does not appear to be of the view that the Sages themselves had this view, whereas R. Soloveitchik claims that the Sages themselves did not actually believe in demons as supernatural entities.

There are some devout *charedim* today who insist upon the reality of demons, and engage in revisionist scholarship in order to show that even Rambam believed in them.<sup>121</sup> At the other end of the spectrum, there are those who are dogmatic about the rationalist approach and claim that no great Rabbinic scholars ever believed in the existence of demons.<sup>122</sup> But most traditionalists take a different approach; they simply ignore the entire topic, as Haym Soloveitchik observes:

Mention of demons evokes nowadays unease in most religious circles, including *haredi* ones. For the contemporary Ashkenazi community is acculturated, and one of its hallmarks... is its basic acceptance of the mechanistic universe of modern science with its disallowance of ghosts and demons. The simple fact, however, is that demons are part of both the Talmudic and kabbalistic cosmology, and equally, if not more so, of the traditional, East European one. Only one major halakhic figure, Maimonides, influenced by the no less mechanistic universe of Aristotle, denied their existence. For this, he was roundly castigated by the GRA, who equally pinpointed the source of Maimonides' skepticism on the matter (*Bi'ur ha-Gra, Yoreh De'ah*, 179:13). Despite the enormous influence of the GRA today, his words on this issue have fallen on deaf ears, or rather, consigned to oblivion. Significantly, demons and ghosts are still part of the popular Israeli Sefardi cosmology, and is reflected in the preachings available on cassettes in Israel. (Haym Soloveitchik, "Rupture and Reconstruction: The Transformation of Contemporary Orthodoxy")

The approach of the Schottenstein (Artscroll) edition of the Talmud to demons is also revealing. Although written by traditionalists for traditionalists, they are aware of many contemporary challenges, and seek to address them wherever they can do so without upsetting traditionalist sensibilities. Thus, when the Talmud incorrectly describes bats as laying eggs, the Schottenstein edition notes that some mammals do lay

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<sup>120</sup> *Logic of the Heart, Logic of the Mind*, pp. 50-52.

<sup>121</sup> See e.g. Reuven Schmeltzer, *Chaim B'emunasam*, pp. 290-291.

<sup>122</sup> R. Moshe ben Chaim, a product of Rabbi Yisroel Chait's Yeshiva Bnei Torah, claims that not only did the Sages not believe in demons (<http://www.mesora.org/shadim.html>), but neither did Ramban or any of the other Rishonim (<http://www.mesoraforum.org/archive/index.php/t-39.html>).



eggs, implying that the Talmud may indeed be correct. When the Talmud makes various statements about planet earth and the cosmos that are clearly since disproven, the Schottenstein edition insists that the Talmud is not speaking literally. But with demons, where it is not possible to get away with insisting that they exist or that the Talmud does not mean to describe such things, the Schottenstein commentary simply notes the dispute between Rambam and others. And when the Talmud writes at length about the demonic dangers involved in having things in pairs, the Schottenstein commentary notes the (convenient) approach of Chacham Yosef Chaim (the “Ben Ish Chai,” Baghdad-Jerusalem 1832-1909) that this is no longer a concern, since the power of demons to harm via pairs has disappeared.<sup>123</sup>

## Analysis and Conclusion

One usually imagines a disagreement about the existence of demons to be a dispute between superstition and reason, between loyalty to authority and devotion to rational investigation. This was indeed the case with some rabbinic scholars. Figures such as R. Moshe Taku did not care for rational investigation; it was only received tradition that counted. At the other extreme, R. Yaakov b. Abba Mari Anatoli fully acknowledged that great Sages had believed in the existence of demons, but nevertheless was emphatic that they did not exist and lamented the errors of the greats.

Yet we see very little difference between some of those who believed in demons and some of those who denied their existence. Compare, for example, Chasdai Crescas and Levi b. Avraham. Both state that one should accept that which is a received tradition from prophets and Sages, and that which is experientially demonstrated. Crescas determines that demons are indeed a received tradition from prophets and Sages, and have been experientially demonstrated, whereas Levi considers that they have not been experientially demonstrated and are not a received tradition from prophets and Sages. Likewise, figures such as Ramban and Avraham Yagel justified their belief in such things on the grounds of (alleged) empirical evidence. In principle, the methodology is the same; the difference in application and results simply reflects a difference between the intellectual climates in which the different figures lived.

Or maybe not. It can be argued that while all proclaim the same methodology, in fact they are different. For Crescas (and much more so with non-philosophers) it is received tradition that is dominant, whereas for Levi it is experiential demonstrations which are dominant, with the traditions being (subconsciously re-)interpreted in light

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<sup>123</sup> *Ben Yehoyada to Pesachim 110b s.v. Lo yochal.*

of this. After all, at the end of the day, most of the rationalist philosophers did not accept the existence of demons. The reason why their intellectual climate did not include them is precisely because their focus was on that which can be experientially demonstrated and intellectually comprehended.

Perhaps both ways of looking at it have are partially true. It is clear that *some* of the authorities who believed in demons, especially in the earlier period, were nevertheless at least in principle much closer to the rationalist approach than those in recent times and today who believe in their existence for solely traditionalist reasons. And even many people today who do not believe in demons are themselves far from rationalistically inclined; they simply accept the beliefs of the society in which they live. Ramban and Levi b. Avraham, who believed in demons, were not only more rationalistically inclined than many of those who believe in demons today, but even more than many of those who do *not* believe in them.

It is important to realize that belief in demons is not inherently irrational. In the context of the ancient world, it was a perfectly reasonable belief; indeed, it can be argued that it was the *most* reasonable belief:

Suppose a tree suddenly falls over in the forest. If others account for this by saying that somebody invisible pushed it, the explanation probably seems implausible. But consider *our* explanation: that an unimaginably large number of unimaginably small and invisible particles, working in concert but without any cognitive capacities to coordinate their activities, *pulled* the tree down. Is that really easier to believe?—especially for someone who knows nothing of the complex theory of gravitational pull by atomic particles? Without thousands of years of recorded data fed through the geniuses who led to modern physics, the simplest explanation is that the tree fell either because it chose to or because someone willed it to do so—an analogy of cause, if you like, to daily life. But if we can't *see* anyone or anything making many of the observable things happen, then we must conclude that some possessors of will are invisible. Enter the deities and spirits: invisible possessors of will, who can make things happen out of nowhere... The question is now not “*What* made the tree fall? but “*Who* made it fall?” and to answer the latter, one's entire attention and data-collecting capacities are focused in a different direction. (Elizabeth Wayland Barber and Paul T. Barber, *When They Severed Earth From Sky: How the Human Mind Shapes Myth* (Princeton University Press 2004) p. 42)

As a result, what has been termed a “towering edifice of authority”<sup>124</sup> was built up to support demonic magic, supported by religion, classical literature, scientific writing, and popular belief. The belief in demons thus cannot be classified as an inherently irrational belief.

We do well to remember that the [pre-modern] world... was a rational world, in many ways more rational than our own. It is true that it was a world of witches and demons... But this was the given reality about which most of the decisions and actions of the age, throughout the entire western world, revolved. (David E. Stannard, *The Puritan Way of Death* (Oxford University Press 1977) p. 69)

However peculiar they now seem, the beliefs of pre-modern people were normally a rational response to the intellectual and social context in which they were expressed. (Darren Oldridge, *Strange Histories*, p. 3)

This was not only true of the early medieval period, but even of the seventeenth century:

Delmedigo’s *testimonia* for these beings are hardly ludicrous when judged by the sensibilities of seventeenth-century Jewish and Christian culture. Moreover, as I have discussed in the case of Abraham Yagel, demonology in this era was more than pseudo-science and superstition. At its best, it represented a rational attempt to explain the unknown and could often contribute to the scientific discourse of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. (David Ruderman, *Jewish Thought and Scientific Discovery in Early Modern Europe*, p. 143)

Thus, instead of categorizing the rabbinic authorities cited in this study as those who believed in demons and those who denied their existence, it would be more meaningful to categorize them as rationalists (which includes many who did believe in demons) versus dogmatists. We should further acknowledge that there is a spectrum of attitudes rather than a clear division between two extremes. The mere fact of someone ultimately accepting that demons exist does not at all mean that he is not a rationalist—it all depends upon the historical context.

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<sup>124</sup> Sydney Anglo, “Melancholia and Witchcraft: The Debate between Wier, Bodin, and Scot,” in *The Literature of Witchcraft*, Ed. Brian P. Levac (Routledge 1992) p. 110.

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