



*Series on Belief & Faith—The Supernatural*

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*The Supernatural*



***Noahide Nations Nagid Clergy  
Continuing Education Program***

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# *The Supernatural*

## **Introduction**

HaShem's creation is amazing and diverse, including far more than our physical senses allow us to perceive. The parts of creation lying beyond the senses are usually, and often erroneously, called "supernatural." However, these "supernatural" elements are actually far more natural than they may seem. They are part of the world and, in a sense, almost commonplace. Once we accept the paranormal as normal, the question of natural vs. unnatural becomes one of what constitutes natural vs. unnatural relationships to these entities. Most of the material cited here is summarized from the *Sefer HaBris*, *Derech HaShem*, and the writings of the Ari Zt"l. Know that this is a big topic – we will only give the scantest overview here.

## **Supernatural vs. Natural**

It is a common mistake to assume that the sages made no distinction between natural and supernatural causation. For example, while many ancient peoples attributed disease to demons and spirits, the sages had a far more advanced understanding. There Talmud provides us with many examples:

- Kesubos 110b – The Talmud acknowledges that moving and other stressful life-changes might cause digestive problems.
- Taanis 21b – Rabbi Yehudah decreed a fast due to an epidemic among pigs. The Talmud asked: "Does Rabbi Yehudah hold that an epidemic of one species will spread to another?" The answer is surprising: "No, but the biology of pigs and humans is similar enough that they are likely to suffer from the same diseases."
- Bava Metzia 107b – Chills and colds are the result of wind; one did not bundle up sufficiently against the cold.

- And many, many, more...<sup>1</sup>

The Talmudic understanding is that there are unseen, yet natural causes for disease and other phenomena while, concurrently, there are also metaphysical and spiritual causes. It is very important to realize that, unlike many ancient peoples, the Sages did not simply attribute supernatural agency to events for which they lacked scientific or natural explanations.<sup>2</sup>

## Ghosts

The soul's existence is entirely independent of the physical. However, the soul's ability to affect and benefit from this world is dependent on its remaining bound to the body. When the body ceases its biological function, the soul's existence continues, unhindered, upon its own plane. At that point, it has four options: it can either ascend to the gardens (as discussed previously), become reincarnated, seek refuge in another body (possession), or continue disembodied. The disembodied existence of an unclothed soul is only possible for a brief period of time. During this period the disembodied soul is not visible, yet can be sensed by the higher faculties of another soul.<sup>3</sup> Animals in particular are sensitive to such things and often sense them with greater ease than people.<sup>4</sup>

## Apparitions

Apparitions are the auditory and/or visible manifestation of a soul that is no longer carried by a body. The most famous example of an apparition is from I

<sup>1</sup> Kesuvos 20a, 77a; Brachos 25a; Bava Kamma 60b; Sanhedrin 9a. There are many more sources.

<sup>2</sup> This isn't to imply that the sages always understood the scientific causation of things. After all, there are many examples of apparent scientific error in the Talmud. The most famous are Shabbos 107b, Pesachim 94b, and Chullin 127a. The Rambam famously wrote (*Moreh Nevuchim* 3:14) that the Sages relied upon the best science of their time, which was not always correct. There is significant dispute and debate as to how to understand these apparent errors and to what degree they impact religious practice. The important point is that the sages understood that there were phenomena whose exact causes, though invisible, were not by default supernatural. By the same token, they also understood there to be events of apparently natural mechanism whose roots were entirely supernatural. The result is a complicated world-view of subtle interplay between the physical causes of the spiritual and vice-versa.

<sup>3</sup> Megillah 3a – “Though he does not see, his *mazal* sees...”

<sup>4</sup> See Bava Kamma 60b and Maharal *Beer HaGolab* V, p. 98.

Samuel 28, in which King Saul used a necromancer to summon the soul of the prophet Samuel. A close reading of this event reveals that, while the necromancer was able to see the prophet, only Saul was able to converse with it. Similarly, Saul was able to communicate with Samuel, but could not see him. Ralbag<sup>5</sup> explains that only the necromancer was able to see Samuel because her imagination was focused on the visual appearance of Samuel. Saul, however, needed information from Samuel and, therefore, focused his mind on the conversation alone. This implies that the apparitions of the voice and appearance of the prophet did not exist physically. Instead, they were only projected into the minds of those attuned to perceiving them.

This is true of all apparitions, be they of spirits or angels. Daniel 10 buttresses this understanding:

*I lifted up my eyes and looked and beheld a man clothed in linen... And I Daniel alone saw the vision, for the men that were with me saw it not; nevertheless, a great trembling took hold of them, and they fled...*

Daniel alone perceived a form for the entity, while the others only sensed its presence. In truth, the entity had no form for it was an entirely spiritual presence.

Maimonides, in his *Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah*, writes:

*One can never see matter without form or form without matter... The forms that are devoid of matter cannot be perceived with the physical eye, but only with the mind's eye.*<sup>6</sup>

In every recorded instance of an apparition it required the presence of an observer.

It should be noted, that the conjuring of an apparition from the souls of the dead is a sever prohibition.

## Angels

God cannot breach the veil between his essence and *Chalal* – the void in which all creation came to be. Were God's essence to intrude into this arena, all creation would immediately cease to be. The reason is that in the presence of God's

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<sup>5</sup> Rabbi Levi ben Gershom (1288 – 1344). One of the great medieval bible commentators, a noted physician, and astronomer.

<sup>6</sup> 4:7.

absolute oneness, no other existence is possible. Therefore, to act directly upon this world, God needs an agent, a tool. These are the *Melakhim*, angels. They are mechanistic beings which exist to execute specific aspects of God's will upon the created world. The name of an angel alludes to its purpose:

- *Raphael* – From the words *rofe*, healer of, *Eyl*, God. This angel is the Healer of God, the one who brings healing to those who need it.
- *Gavriel* – From *gibor*, the mighty one, *ayl*, of God. This angel, the Mighty One of God, carries out acts of power and destruction.
- *Uriel* – From *Ohr*, light of, *Eyl*, God. The Light of God is the angel who illuminated, interprets, and explains.
- *Someil* – This angel, whose name we never say, is the Poison of God. His duty is to prosecute the wicked and execute God's punishment. He is sometimes called the *Soton* – the adversary.

Angels have no will independent of God's will. As purely spiritual beings, they have no physical appearance or shape. Instead, they exist as abstract forms. What then, are we to make of the many descriptions of angels found in the Tanakh?

Writes Maimonides:

*...For the angels have no physical bodies, only abstract forms. What then is meant when the prophets report having seen a being of fire or with wings? These descriptions are part of the prophetic vision and should be understood allegorically.<sup>7</sup>*

We see that the vision and appearance of the angel, as experienced in the mind of the prophet, is part of the prophetic experience and part of the prophetic message.

## ***Dybbuk & Gilgul***

When a disembodied soul can no longer endure the limbo of being out-of-body, it may seek refuge in a living body currently inhabited by a soul. This is called a *Dybbuk*, a clinging spirit. There are many types of *Dybbuk im*, the most common of which is a *Dybbuk ibur*. This spirit clings to another body silently and has no influence or effect on the host. It merely rides along until the host achieves a certain condition spiritually that is of benefit to the *dybbuk*. Keep in mind,

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<sup>7</sup> *Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah* 2:3-4.

however, that the soul has a number of parts. Either the entire soul may become a *dybbuk*, or only certain parts of the soul.

Similarly, a soul may be either entirely or partially reincarnated, in which case it is a *Gilgul*. The main difference between a *Gilgul* and a *dybbuk* is that a *Gilgul* has returned to the higher realms and been sent back, while a *dybbuk* has never ascended. Additionally, a *Gilgul* is usually one soul in one body, while a *dybbuk* is multiple souls or parts of souls in one body.

## **Exorcism**

In incredibly rare cases, a *dybbuk* might assert influence upon its host. In these rare instances, the *dybbuk* has been given permission from on high in order that it may be exorcised. It must be understood that a *dybbuk* is neither evil nor demonic. Rather, the process of possession and exorcism is a rare opportunity for the atonement of both the *dybbuk* and the person within whom it resides. The process of exorcism is one of assisting the soul in making *tikkunim*, repairs, and helping it to repent in whatever way possible absent a body. Once this process is completed, the soul is then capable of ascending.

However, this process is only possible with the assistance of another soul, an exalted soul that can invoke the will of *Shamayim*. This would be the soul of a *tsaddik* or scholar who is capable of assisting the *dybbuk*. Without the proximity of such an individual, an exorcism is not possible. Since an exorcism is not possible, there is no point to the possession. Therefore, it won't happen.

There are very specific criteria for determining legitimate cases of possession. These are incredibly exact requirements and preclude any known physiological, psychiatric, or medical cause for the condition.

Since there are no people capable of exorcising a soul nowadays, legitimate cases of possession do not occur. The last verified case was in Lithuania in the 1930's and involved the Chofetz Chaim, Rabbi Yisrael Meir Poupko (Kagan).

## **Shedim**

Any time that you come across the word "demon" in translations of the Talmud or Midrash, it is almost always a translation of the Hebrew term *Sheid*. Like many translations of Hebrew words, though, it is polluted by Christological connotations.

*Shedim* are odd creatures, having both qualities of men and angels. Although they must eat and drink, they are only loosely bound by the constraints of time and

space. Unlike angels, they can manifest physical form, yet only subject to certain conditions.

Additionally, they are bound by their own concept of Torah law, for which they may be held liable and judged in *Bais Din*, Rabbinic Courts. They also live subject to their own strict social order and are subjects of their own king.

In the past, man had frequent interactions with the *Shedim*. Their relationship to man was complicated and involved a lot of confusion and headache. A major problem is that non-Jewish nations constantly took to worshipping the *Shedim* as deities. The Talmud records that the sages made a number of laws limiting their relationship with man. This legislation culminated with the banishment of *Shedim* from all inhabited areas. Nevertheless, certain *halachos*, religious laws, exist that pertain to them. For example:

- One should not enter a house or other property that has been abandoned for 7 years.
- When remodeling a house, one should not completely seal up any of the doors or windows.
- When building an extension onto a home, one has to verify if it involves extending the property over land onto which a drainpipe or gutter opens. If so, then about a foot of dirt on either side, in front of, and beneath the drainpipe opening must be dug and transported to an uninhabited area.

There are a number of other *halachos* related to *Shedim*. However, most of them are not observed anymore due to the rarity of *Shedim*. A noted Kabbalist once told this author that their interaction with people is so rare that it is as if they do not even exist anymore.

*Shedim* are not singled out as evil or unusual in anyway. They are as much an ordinary part of creation as cows, the sun, spiders, or cats. Like any other animal or person, however, one should not seek to provoke them. The Talmud tells us that if you don't care about them, then they won't care about you.



## Summary of This Lesson

1. The sages were not superstitious. They did not assign supernatural causes to phenomena simply because they did not understand its physical causes.
2. A ghost, for lack of a better term, is a disembodied soul. It can be sensed, but has no physical form.
3. Souls and angels have no physical form or existence at all.
4. An apparition is the perception of a disembodied soul by the mind's eye. To intentionally conjure such an apparition is a severe prohibition.
5. Angels are messengers of God that exist to carry out very specific missions. Their names indicate their mission and purpose.
6. Angels have no will independent of God's will. In this sense, they are solely a tool or mechanism used by God.
7. All or part of a soul that has become disembodied and attached to another living person is a *dybbuk*.
8. All or part of soul that has ascended and returned again is a *Gilgul*.
9. Rarely, a *dybbuk* may be allowed to assert itself for the purpose of being exorcised. This is for the benefit of the *dybbuk* and the possessed individual.
10. This only occurs when there is one in proximity who is capable of exorcising the *dybbuk*. The last confirmed case of a full *dybbuk* was over 80 years ago. Since that time there has not been anyone capable of exorcising one.