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Trance Possession Disorder in Judaism: Sixteenth-Century Dybbuks in the Near East

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ABSTRACT. This article describes constructions of *dybbuk*, the Jewish variant of spirit possession, and its roots in sixteenth-century Kabbalist thought. Based on the analysis of documented early cases, this paper examines the possession idioms from psychological and socio-cultural perspectives by describing two case reports herein conceptualized as trance possession disorders. A comparison with the phenomenology of Dissociative Identity Disorder shows a striking resemblance between the syndromes. This culture-bound condition is discussed both in terms of its intra-psychic dynamics and its societal functions. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2004 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

KEYWORDS. Trance possession disorder, dissociative trance, dybbuk, Judaism

In many different countries, it is believed that supernatural entities have the ability to take possession of people. Spirit possession cults did not only proliferate in ancient times; they are also common in contemporary African, Asian, Caribbean, and Near Eastern societies (e.g., Al-Krinawi, 2000; Kapferer, 1991; Ong, 1987; Littlewood, 1992). For the past two decades or so, anthropologists and mental health professionals have been interested in the varied

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Journal of Trauma & Dissociation, Vol. 5(2) 2004
<http://www.haworthpress.com/web/JTD>
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Digital Object Identifier: 10.1300/J229v05n02_07

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phenomena of spirit possession. When it takes place during an ecstatic trance, the behavior is often termed a vision. When a god, an ancestor, a bad spirit, or some other “inner entity” takes control of the body of a human being, producing disowned behavior, a variety of terms are used, among them hysteria and dissociative identity disorder (Garrett, 1987). Possession trance and dissociative states are not usually considered to be disorders because of their ego-syntonic nature and are seen as a normal part of the spiritual ways in many cultures. (Krippner, 2000). Trance and possession disorders have been added to the *ICD-10* (World Health Organization, 1992). This group of disorders is characterized by a temporary loss of identity and awareness, and the individual may appear to be taken over by some external force, spirit or deity. Diagnosis is made only when the condition is assessed as involuntary and unwanted and when it occurs outside of accepted religious or cultural experiences. The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (Fourth Edition, Text Revision; *DSM-IV-TR*; American Psychiatric Association, 2000) lists Dissociative Trance Disorder as a diagnosis requiring further study. Possession and trance states that are ego-dystonic are listed under the diagnosis Dissociative Disorder Not Otherwise Specified. The definition includes:

Dissociative trance disorder: single or episodic disturbances in the state of consciousness, identity, or memory that are indigenous to particular locations and cultures. Dissociative trance involves narrowing of awareness of immediate surroundings or stereotyped behaviors or movements that are experienced as being beyond one’s control. Possession trance involves replacement of the customary sense of personal identity by a new identity, attributed to the influence of a spirit, power, deity, or other person, and associated with stereotyped “involuntary” movements or amnesia and is perhaps the most common Dissociative Disorder in Asia. (pp. 532-533)

The phenomenon seems to be a universal of human culture, found on every continent at any time. For example, Bourguignon (1973, 1976) found that in one sample of 488 societies, 437, or 90%, had one or more institutionalized, cultural patterned forms of altered states of consciousness. Possession beliefs were found in 74% of the investigated societies, and possession trance in 52% of the same group. Jewish culture is no exception. Although no spirit possession cults have evolved among Jews, the concept of transmigration of souls and the co-habitation of multiple souls in the same physical body is rooted in Jewish mythology and mystical philosophy. Cases of possession trance have been documented in numerous Jewish sources throughout the ages. These have normally been used to promote moral values by providing substantiation to the existence of the hereafter and the dreadful penalty for sinning. The purpose of this paper is to explore historical accounts of possession trance among

Jews and the concomitant Jewish thought on these phenomena. I also wish to examine this information from a psychological point of view.

While no narrative reports of demonic possession among Jews had been discovered before the sixteenth century, Jewish exorcism techniques from earlier centuries have been described in the medieval manuscript *Shushan Yesod ha-Olam* (Susa, Foundation of the World) (Chajes, 1999). Israel's official religion contrasts sharply with contemporary polytheisms in the role assigned to demons, which, in the Old Testament, is virtually nonexistent. Magic was prohibited among the Israelites from very early times. The oldest collection of laws, the Old Testament contains the command, "You shall not suffer a sorceress" (Exodus 22:18). Since much of pagan magic was protective and intended to keep demons away or to expel them, Israel's religion obviously aimed at a very radical extirpation of traffic with demons. Calamities and illnesses were not from demons but from the Lord (Amos 3:6; I Samuel 16:14). The Israelite conception of demons, as it existed in the popular mind or the literary imagination, resembled in some ways that which was held elsewhere. Demons were thought to live in deserts or ruins (Leviticus 16:10; Isaiah 13:21; 34:14). They were seen as inflicting sickness (Psalms 91:5-6), troubling people's minds (Saul in I Samuel 16:15, 23) and deceiving them (I Kings 22:22-23), but nevertheless these evil spirits were seen as being sent by the Lord. Since biblical times, encounters between people and spirits have continued to fascinate observers of human behavior and have been used as a way to explain deviancy and pathology among human beings.

POLYPSYCHIST UNDERSTANDING OF THE MIND IN JEWISH MYSTICISM

The Kabbalistic¹ doctrine of transmigration of souls first appeared in the *Sefer ha-Bahir* (Book of Brightness, Margaliot, 1978) published in the late 12th century. Most of the early Kabbalists saw transmigration as a reprisal for offense against procreation and sexual transgressions. It was seen as a very harsh punishment for the soul that had to undergo it (Scholem, 1971). Possession trance in Judaism is probably best understood within the context of Kabbalist polypsychic thought. The Kabbalist book *The Zohar* (Book of Radiance, Tishbi, 1982), a pillar of Jewish mystical philosophy, described the human psyche as composed of three main souls: *nefesh*, which is a spiritual force that brings the dimension of vitality into being and keeps it alive through action; the *ruach*, which is responsible for human emotions and characteristics, such as desires, lusts, and ambitions, and is also involved in the capacity to choose between good and evil; and *neshama*, which is a spiritual-intellectual guiding soul whose task is to guide and correct evil traits, to overcome lusts, and to harness one's powers to serve the Creator. These three spirits are said to

be able to leave the body individually after death and reincarnate independently and separately.

Many folkloristic possession tales in Judaism contain the term *dybbuk*. In Hebrew, a dybbuk is an external agent, a spirit of the departed, clinging to a person (the Hebrew root D-V-K, pronounced *davok*, means to cling, clutch or adhere). The concept of a dybbuk is also derived from the Kabbalah. The works of the Kabbalists contain contradictory conceptions of demons and spirits. Traditions of the past as well as the cultural environment and the intellectual outlook of each individual Kabbalist contributed toward the diversification of Jewish spiritist thought. In Nahmanides'² opinion, the demons (*shedim*) are to be found in trash (*shedudim*), and in ruined and cold places. They were not created out of the four elements (as many believed), but only out of fire and air. They have subtle bodies, imperceptible to the human senses, and these subtle bodies allow them to fly through fire and air. Because they are composed of various elements, they come under the laws of creation and decay, and they die like human beings. While the thirteenth century Castilian Kabbalists (Isaac ben Jacob ha-Kohen, Moses of Burgos, and Moses de Leon) linked demons to the subhuman world on earth, the *Zohar*, following a Talmudic legend, stressed the origin of the demons in sexual intercourse between humans and demonic powers. The terms *shedim* and *mazzikim* (those who bring damage) were interchangeably used for demons but, in some sources, a certain differentiation is noted. In the *Zohar*, it is thought that the spirits of evil people become *mazzikim* after their death. These wandering souls seek refuge in human beings to ameliorate their destiny by leading a more righteous life.

Later construction of dybbuk possession resulted in the concept of *'ibbur*, first described in the *Zohar* in the second half of the thirteenth century. *'ibbur* in Hebrew means impregnation and connotes the penetration of another soul into a person—not during pregnancy or at birth, but during his or her lifetime. The purpose of *'ibbur* was to allow the soul of a righteous person who did not have the opportunity to fulfill all of the 613 Jewish commandments to be temporarily reincarnated in a person who did have the opportunity to fulfill them. The process was called *gilgul*, (reincarnation or transmigration of souls). Although *gilgul* had been seen first as a punishment for a sinful soul, it was later construed as an act of divine mercy meant not only to purify the sinner's spirit, but also to benefit the universe (Kushnir-Oron, 1989). This kind of spirit penetrated humans to find refuge because spirits of sinners were doomed to remain in limbo, exposed to ruthless persecution by angelic and demonic beings (Nigal, 1980). Chajes (1999), in his historical analysis of the dybbuk phenomenon, claims that Jews in Spain (before the expulsion) believed that *gilgul* was a reincarnation coincident with birth. Healing techniques were designed to bind the disembodied souls of the dead to the embodied souls.

Sixteenth-century Kabbalists had observed the variations in memory functions among the possessed and began to use the terms *gilgul* and *'ibbur* differentially. *Gilgul* implied "past-life" amnesia, with the possessing agent unable to remember his (almost all possessing spirits were male) previous identity. An *'ibbur*, on the other hand, connoted inter-soul amnesia with the possessing spirit able to recall who he was while the host personality remained oblivious to the possessing spirit's existence and characteristics.

Women, though not by any means the exclusive victims of spirit possession, were considered particularly susceptible to impregnation by penetrating spirits (Hallamish, 1985). Certain spirits endowed the possessed women with clairvoyant powers. These positively valued possession states were termed *Maggid* (from the Hebrew root h-g-d [pronounced huggade], which means one who says or tells, thus, a soothsayer). A *maggid* was not considered a disembodied soul like a *dybbuk* or an *'ibbur*, but rather an angelic spirit displacing the original personality of the possessed with that of an "other" (Chajes, 1999).

In the middle of the sixteenth century, Jewish accounts of possession were copious, and at the beginning of the seventeenth century, they had become a common phenomenon testified to by numerous descriptions (Idel, 1989). A change in readiness to document these experiences in modern Jewish history and the availability of alternative positivist explanations might explain the decline in reported possession phenomena among Jews in recent times. In the following section, I shall present excerpts from some case studies described in sixteenth and seventeenth century Near Eastern Jewish writings. A comparison with the phenomenology of Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) shows a striking resemblance between the syndromes. This culture-bound condition is discussed both in terms of its intra-psychic dynamics and its societal functions.

THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF POSSESSION: TWO CASE ILLUSTRATIONS

Many of the most powerful accounts of spirit possession in Jewish writings originated from the sacred city of Safed, a city of Kabbalist mystics, located in the Galilee Mountains of what is now the State of Israel. Several mid-sixteenth century Safedian sources describing possession cases have survived. The following are analyses of chosen illustrative excerpts from some of those historical sources.

Case 1

One of these ancient manuscripts is Joseph Sambari's *Divrei Yoseph* (Words of Joseph, in Shtober, 1994, pp. 319-324), which describes the ac-

count of Rabbi Elijah Falqon and three other important Safedian Rabbis who witnessed the event and were signatories to the manuscript. This impressive account of Jewish spirit possession is entitled “The great event in Safed” and begins with a sermonic preface lamenting corrupt human nature:

Being that a person is more inclined to bring himself closer to the pleasure of the body for its sensory pleasure than to follow the advice of his soul and the direction and guidance of the Torah . . . (Passage 2)

The writer sets the context in which he wishes the story to be understood: sinful carnal deviance from the teaching of the Torah. The consequences of moral digression follows with the tragic testimony of a witnessed dybbuk possession. The manuscript proceeds to portray a woman’s altered state of consciousness. The sages note how unresponsive she is to aversive stimulation:

Two men, experts in supplications and many matters, approached the woman so that the spirit within the woman would speak, by means of the smoke of fire and sulfur that they would blow into her nostrils. It was as though she was not there, for she would not distance herself—not even her head—away from the side of the . . . smoke. (Passage 6)

The writer observes a dramatic depersonalization in her analgesic-like demeanor and describes it with words commonly used by modern dissociation clinicians, “She was like not there” (Passage 6). Contact is established with the possessing agent after it responds to a direct address by the treating experts. The spirit responds with a tone of voice that is distinctly dissimilar to that of the afflicted woman. She produces animal-like sounds while her facial muscles appear paralyzed:

By means of supplications the voice would begin to be heard, a deep and continued voice like “the roaring of the lion and the voice of a fierce lion” (Job 4:10) without any movement of the tongue or opening of the lips. . . . They would quarrel and speak against him with a loud voice, and say to him: “Evil one, speak and say who you are in clear speech!” Then the voice would reveal itself, and show itself to all that it was like the voice of men. (Passage 6)

Consistent with their understanding of the etiology of the problem, the treating sages proceed to inquire about past sinful behaviors of the possessing alter:

They asked him “For which transgressions do you transmigrate in the world in transmigrations like these?” He responded that such was his punishment for many transgressions that he had committed . . . (Passage 8)

In response to this confrontation and exorcism, the woman discloses her sins in an altered state. During the exorcism, she seems to lose further control:

. . . and they reproached him and spoke harshly against him. . . They pressed him . . . with the abovementioned smoke . . . that the spirit should depart through the big nail of one of her feet . . . the robe that was upon her fell off her legs and thighs, and she revealed and humiliated herself before everyone's eyes. They came close to her to cover her thighs; neither did she feel herself in this at all . . . (Passage 21)

Direct expressions of sexuality were severely restricted in traditional Jewish communities during previous centuries. Such uncharacteristic behavior would have been tolerated only if a woman was not held responsible for it. The projection of forbidden impulses onto a "non-me" agent cohabiting with the core identity could have provided the outlet for the culturally forbidden sexual narrative that this woman felt compelled to express. The treating experts seem to appreciate the torment and potential social stigma for the anguished woman, and, in line with their theological understanding, they admonish the spirit, demanding that it leave:

He said many times: "Let this poor Jewish woman be, and do not hurt her!" And they said to him "It is you who hurts her; leave if you have mercy on her." (Passage 22)

Terrorized by the exorcism, the possessing spirit threatens to kill the woman, thereby demonstrating an illusion of separateness. It ultimately yields to the intimidating pressures and complies:

And he answered "Do not continue to force me, for if you force me to go out I shall take her soul with me." . . . They said to him: "Sit up on the bed and then go out, and if you do not want to, then we shall force you." . . . He sat up on the bed without any help . . . (Passage 22) And then suddenly she began to speak. She was sitting and saying: "He has already left." (Passage 23)

The sages, however, suspect feigned healing and continue to coerce the spirit to leave. Under agonizing torment, she cries for help. It is, however, not her husband or her parents for whom she cries. She calls her father-in-law and her grandmother to the rescue. The text does not provide an explanation for her preference, but it is evident that in her most regressed and needy state, she does not reach out to her parents or husband as trustworthy rescuers:

And they did not believe her . . . and they wanted to torture her again . . . and she cried to her father-in-law and her grandmother: “Why do you let them burn me . . . (Passage 24) I know that it is true that he indeed has left.” And they said to her: “What is the matter” And she replied, “Must I tell you?” (Passage 25)

The woman, now grounded and aware of binding social norms, is embarrassed to reveal from which body part the possessing spirit exited:

And they understood that it was a matter which could not be told in public, and they said to a woman: “Go to her and she will reveal the matter to you.” And so it was done, and it became known that the spirit went out through that place and drew blood as he went out. (Passage 25)

The troubled woman revived and concluded the spirit had left after she felt something exiting through her vagina. However, the symptom relief was short-lived:

And an hour later the sages came to her, when the cry went out in the city: “Behold, the spirit of a man from Israel speaks in a woman.” And when they saw her they said: “He has definitely not departed, and he if he has departed he has come back again.” (Passage 27)

A second examination of the afflicted woman reveals lingering dissociation and anxiety symptoms. This violently conflicted individual saw no prospect for resolution and died:

They said so because of the signs they saw, such as the eyes which were glazed, and the breathing which appeared strenuous. . . . And eight days later the poor woman died because of the spirit which did not leave her, and they saw that he choked her and went out with her soul . . . (Passage 28)

Case 2

Another important historical source on sixteenth century possession accounts comes from the court of the great Kabbalistic scholar Rabbi Isaak Luria of Safed. His disciple, Rabbi Hayyim Vital, recorded possession cases he had witnessed with his master and his analyses of these events in a diary that survived through the ages. The manuscript has been reprinted in modern times (e.g., Vital, 1988, 1994, 1997). One of Vital’s mystic manuscripts, *Sefer ha-Heyonot* (The Book of Visions), contains an interesting description of a maggid possession by the reincarnated soul of Rabbi PISO in the young daughter of Rabbi Raphael Anav (Chajes, 1999, Appendix Two) of Damascus. This ac-

count describes the evolution of a girl from being an involuntary victim controlled by a benign spirit to being a virtuoso performer of communication with this and other spirits at will. Ms. Anav switches and emerges from the possessing trance as herself, capable of communicating with angels while awake:

Afterwards, other things happened, and not by the aforesaid spirit while it was still embedded in her, because it had already left her and the girl remained completely healthy. But she says that she sometimes sees visions, while awake and in the dream state, through souls and angels . . . (Passage 7)

The language used to describe the occurrence does not illustrate a replacement of the original personality by the possessing entity, as is often the case in demon possession, but rather the supplementation of the existing soul with another spirit. The writer describes lingering hallucinatory symptoms in a “completely healthy” girl. It appears that she did not seem mad or psychotic to the writer, but quite normal. Nevertheless, she reportedly experienced visual hallucinations of disembodied humanoid entities that appeared both in her waking state and in a trance (“dream state”). This observation could be congruent with modern observations on dissociative hallucinations (e.g., of personality alters) among non-schizophrenic patients (e.g., Steinberg, Cicchetti, Buchanan, Rakfeldt, & Rounsaville, 1994).

The same source also describes an audible conversation between Ms. Anav and these vocal apparitions. Interestingly, the voice talks to Ms. Anav, but refers to her in the third person as “the girl”:

He [the spirit] said to her, “tell [those present] that they should go out to the courtyard until the spirit enters the girl.” The three went out to the courtyard, and the spirit entered the girl, and she said: “Tell Abulafia to come close to this window from outside.” He [Abulafia] got closer and asked, “Why did you not stay in the girl until you sent me out?” He [the spirit] said to him, “Because you are not worthy to see me when I am dressing, for you are a sinner. And now the Messiah is angry with you.” (Passage 19)

The possessing voice orders the men to leave when he enters the girl, suggesting that the entry process into her might involve some disrobing or the exposure of intimate body parts. In response to a question about the reason for expelling the men from the room, the voice, speaking from the girl’s mouth, directly accuses one of the men of some (possibly sexual) transgressions. The wise man’s spirit is described as existing side by side with the girl’s self in what is known among dissociation clinicians as co-consciousness (e.g., Alderman & Marshall, 1998). Vital describes how it addresses the girl without

suppressing or denigrating her. The spirit instructs her on what to say in preparation for his sermon and is aware of the need to protect her modesty in the presence of men. Through this young woman, the possessing spirit proceeds to implore Rabbi Vital to bring the sinning Jewish community to repent. Many of the accusations that are delivered through the girl's mouth are about sexual offenses.

. . . and when the men leave their homes, the servants sleep with their wives . . . your wives walk around shamelessly with garments and jewelry of shame . . . and revealed breasts—and whose bosoms are stuffed with clothes to show their large breasts; with sprawling scarves and thin veils to show off their bodies . . . to arouse the evil desire in men . . . (Passage 20)

Not unlike child survivors of sexual abuse, this girl is precociously knowledgeable about feminine seduction and male desires (e.g., Corwin, 1990). The account further describes how she (through the possessing spirit) identifies many sinners by name, including the most erotic Hebrew poet of that era, Rabbi Israel Najara. This prominent liturgical poet is described by this maiden as a filthy-mouthed drunkard, a sodomite, and a fornicator.

DISCUSSION

Although these Jewish possession accounts are written from a strong ideological standpoint aimed at intimidating sinners by threatening inevitable reprisals in the next world, they are also laced with bold sexual overtones. This is somewhat perplexing, considering that these accounts were written as exegeses of the Holy Scriptures and in books of Hassidic tales published for a religious readership. Irrespective of the ontology of these phenomena, the trustworthiness of the testimonies on these observed behavioral prototypes seems reasonable. The reports were primarily written by reputable eyewitnesses who identified all individuals present by name, and the reports were also confirmed by other respectable bystanders testifying to their accuracy. Secondly, despite the high variability in the quality of the case descriptions and their depicted ecology, the syndromes described show a remarkable resemblance, adding reliability to the occurrence investigated. For example, the convergence of sexuality with spirit possession in these Jewish accounts is dramatic. Somer and Saadon (2000), Bilu, (1985), and Crapanzano (1977) have argued that the elements in the idiom of spirit possession must constitute fitting allegorical symbols of the conflicts, repressed impulses, and censored narratives supposedly underlying them. The loci of the entrance and exit of the possessing spirits are highly suggestive of sexual intercourse. Indeed the first Kabbalists linked

transmigration of souls specifically with sexual misbehaviors (Scholem, 1971). Given the preponderance of women among the recorded Jewish possession victims and that almost all possessing agents being male, an underlying story begins to unfold. Additionally, with the vagina or rectum identified repeatedly as a point of entry (Bilu & Beit-Hallahmi, 1989), the core story is hardly disguised. Bilu (1985), who investigated similar sources, has also noted strong links between transmigration of souls in Judaism and sexual misconduct: an uncharacteristically explicit sexual language used in describing the phenomenon, a predominantly heterosexual male spirit–female victim relationship, the young age of the victims (often described as “babe,” “child,” or “maiden”), vaginal or rectal loci of entry and exit, and semantic synonymy in Hebrew between impregnation and spirit possession (both termed ‘ibbur). Some self-reports of the spirits’ entry experiences in Jewish girls were strongly suggestive of rape. A nineteenth century account of an 11-year-old girl from Jerusalem describes the spirit’s entry as, “I stumbled, I was pushed, then I had to lie down and was turned over” (Bilu, 1985). An early twentieth century description of the spirit’s entry by a Jewish Baghdadi girl states, “Something like a big cat fell on my hips, in between the shoulders, stretching me in order to force his way into me” (Bilu, 1985).

These sexual allegories, particularly brazen and bold given their socio-cultural contexts, raise strong suspicions that the symbol and the symbolized could not be too divergent. The unsublimated language and the overt sexual behaviors, ostensibly, leave little to disguise. What conflict or trauma could have been sublimated by defense mechanisms and still described in this outspoken manner? What experience (remembered, repressed or dissociated) could be covered well enough by these idioms without threatening the protagonist or the audience? As seen in Table 1, the likeness between these and other possession stories (e.g., Bilu, 2003) from the past and modern post-traumatic dissociative psychopathology is striking.

Were the dybbuk cases described in this study actually suffering from DID? Without the obvious capacity to clinically evaluate these women, a suggestion of dissociative psychopathology would appear to be an indefensible speculation. Kleinman (1987) describes how the use of inappropriate disease categories to assess illness experience can lead to “category fallacies.” When a particular disease category, developed in one cultural group, is applied to another group, it can fail to identify many people to whom it can apply because it lacks coherence in the second culture. The concern here, therefore, is that the idioms of mental distress used by researchers and practitioners are different from those used by the researched or treated group. I believe that the data provided in this paper depict a convincing similarity between the categories of dybbuk possession and dissociative identity disorder. However, the data fall

TABLE 1. Comparison of historical dybbuk possession cases researched for this article and Dissociative Identity Disorder

Feature	Dybbuk	Dissociative Identity Disorder
Age of onset	Probably childhood-teens	Childhood
Sex of victims	Mostly female	Mostly female
Trance Ritual	No	No
Behavior seen as a normal behavior within cultural or religious context	No	No
Induction	Unknown	Emotional Stress
Purported causative factor	Sexual transgressions or conflicts over forbidden drives	Sexual transgressions and conflicts over forbidden drives
Precocious sexual knowledge	Yes	Yes
Possessing agent	Spirit	Alter personality
Inter-alter amnesia	Often	Often
Relationship with host	Co-habitation	Co-habitation
Alteration of identity	Yes	Yes
Opposite-gender identities (male in female)	Yes	Yes
Trance symptoms	Yes	Yes
Audible internal dialogues	Yes	Yes
Subjective loss of control	Yes	Yes
Significant impairment in social or occupational functioning, or causes marked distress	Yes	Yes
Narrowing of attention	Yes	Yes
Analgesia or general unawareness	Yes	Yes
Hallucinations	Yes	Yes
Self-injurious or suicidal behaviors in altered-state	Probable	Yes
Treatment involves talking about sexual indecencies of an alter or a possessing entity	Yes	Yes
Resistance to treatment by aggressive alter	Yes	Yes

short of persuading me that historical dybbuk possession cases should be psychiatrically reconceptualized as DID cases.

By allowing individuals to communicate about their forbidden secrets and inner conflicts through a “non-me” agent, the dybbuk may have enabled ventilation and some processing of otherwise inexpressible traumatic and/or guilt-

promoting experiences. The phenomenon was tolerated by the authorities in close-knit traditional communities because the correction of this deviance was executed publicly and harnessed to enhance social control and conformity in the community (Bilu, 2003). The daunting metaphysical drama was yoked to the social interest in abolishing aberrant norms and behaviors and the strengthening of the Torah and its healing powers.

Readers should also take note of slightly divergent views on the ontogenesis of sexualized trance possession phenomena. For example, Walter Stephens (2002) demonstrated how charges of witchcraft were often impregnated with sexual overtones. He too argued that possession states brought repressed sexual conflicts to the surface and that these crises were exploited and often provoked by men as a sort of metaphysical voyeurism. Such voyeuristic scenarios were based on the idea that women were more passive, material, corruptible, and less spiritual than men. The sexual assaults by demons on Ursuline nuns at Loudon in the 1630s were also seen as examples of explosive sexuality, ineffectively repressed (Rapley, 1998). Regardless of the exorcists' driving motives, the clinical picture displayed by the suffering women and their narratives still remains suggestive of sexual trauma.

Accounts of spirit possession in Judaism have been continuously documented through the centuries. While their presentation is not always similar to the cases I have discussed, more often than not they involve women being penetrated through their sexual organs by possessing male agents (e.g., Alexander, 2003; Mark, 2003; Somer, 1993). This subject is intriguing to present-day trauma clinicians, but not without misgivings. To avoid a theological clash over the belief in the afterlife and in demons, some writers have recommended a therapeutically neutral approach (e.g., Bull, Ellason & Ross, 1998). Others have argued strongly against encouraging beliefs in possession by afflicted patients and have warned against the psychological dangers of exorcism (e.g., Bowman, 1993; Fraser, 1993). Possession cases around the world are usually given that label within the context of a specific metaphysical worldview that is almost invariably spiritual or religious in some way. Assigning a possession case a medical diagnosis instead, thus bestowing this phenomenon with a scientific stamp, can offer little help to most of the possessed who would rather address their problem within the traditional cultural contexts from which their possession derives its meaning. An example of this was a possession trance disorder case widely publicized in the Israeli press in 1999. Judith, a widowed mother of eight from the rural Israeli town of Dimona claimed that the spirit of her deceased husband had entered her and lived within her. This case (of which I have personally studied the exorcism video tapes) illustrated that possession may still be alive in parts of Israel in the third millennium. Her exorcism ceremony was performed by Kabbalist Rabbi David Basri, in the presence of dozens of Kabbalah sages. To serve its theosophical educational role

of instilling belief in an afterlife, the importance of piety in this life, and rabbinical authority, the ritual was broadcast live by private ultra-religious radio stations and filmed on video. It was later distributed by followers of Rabbi Basri to encourage adherence to a religious way of life. It is highly unlikely that this poor ultra-orthodox widow would have presented her trance possession disorder to a psychotherapist.³

The suggestion of treatment guidelines for possession cases, where other diagnoses are rejected outright, is beyond the scope of this article. In agreement with Crabtree (1993) and consistent with previous clinical reports (Bull, Ellason & Ross, 1998; Henderson, 1982; Martinez-Taboas, 1999; Somer, 1993), I believe that when those who are suffering present themselves in the clinic, clinicians can diagnose and effectively treat possession trance disorder without taking a stand on the ontology of possession. However, in light of reports on negative effects of exorcism in North America (Bowman, 1993; Fraser, 1993) caution should be exercised until future research demonstrates that more favorable results are obtainable with alternative exorcism techniques or in other cultures.

NOTE

1. Kabbalah is an aspect of Jewish mysticism. It consists of a large body of speculation on the nature of divinity, the creation, the origin and fate of the soul, and the role of human beings. It consists also of meditative, devotional, mystical, and magical practices that were taught only to a select few.

2. Moses Nahmanides (1194-1270) was a biblical exegete, Kabbalist, scholar of Jewish law, poet and physician, leading intellectual and communal leader of the Jewish community in Catalonia, Spain.

3. A few days before the revision of this article, I was introduced to a Kabbalist Rabbi during a wedding we both attended. We talked about his experience with dybbuk possession. I asked him if he thought women have been somehow chosen to be possessed by the dybbuks. In other words, what about them attracted the dybbuks? The Rabbi hesitated for a moment, but then leaned towards to me and whispered, "These women were weakened by grave sins . . . their families were incestuous."

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RECEIVED: 07/06/03

REVISED: 09/17/03

09/24/03

ACCEPTED: 09/24/03