

I'm Friends With the Monster That's Inside the Talmud

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PART I: WHY STUDY MONSTERS?

Source 1: Merriam-Webster Dictionary, definition of "monster"

a : an animal or plant of abnormal form or structure: a mythical monster;
a sea monster

b : one who deviates from normal or acceptable behavior or character

c : an animal of strange or terrifying shape

d : something monstrous; especially : a person of unnatural or extreme ugliness, deformity, wickedness, or cruelty ; His father was a monster who beat his children for no reason.

e : one that is highly successful; That movie was a monster at the box office.

Source 2: Stephen Amsa, *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears*

Monster derives from the Latin word *monstrum*, which in turn derives from the root *monere* (to warn). To be a monster is to be an omen. Sometimes the monster is a display of God’s wrath, a portent of the future, a symbol of moral virtue or vice, or an accident of nature. The monster is more than an odious creature of the imagination; it is a kind of *cultural category*, employed in domains as diverse as religion, biology, literature, and politics.

- What is Amsa’s definition of a monster?
- What role does the monster serve in society according to Amsa?
- In what ways does this reveal that the category of the monster is unstable?

PART II: JEWISH MONSTERS

Source 3: Howard Schwartz, *Tree of Souls: The Mythology of Judaism*



All of Creation had been completed except for the north corner of the world. God began to create it, but left it unfinished, saying, “Whoever declares himself to be God, let him come and finish this corner, and then all shall know he is a god.” There, in that unfinished corner, demons, winds, earthquakes, and evil spirits dwell, and from there they come forth to the world, as it is said, *From the north shall disaster break loose* (Jer. 1:14). When the Sabbath departs, great bands of evil spirits set out from there and roam the world.

Rabbi Moshe Hayim Luzzatto offers a different perspective about unfinished creation: “God began Creation but left it unfinished so that man could eventually bring it to completion” (*Adir ba-Marom*).

The Kotzker Rebbe said of this unfinished corner of creation: “One little corner—God left one little corner in darkness so that we may

Sources:

*Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer 3; Midrash
Konen in Beit ha-Midrash 2:30; Sefer ha-
Zikhronot 1:7; The Book of Jubilees 2:2;
Zohar 1:14b; Siah Sarfei Kodesh; Or ha-
Ganuz.*

Source 4: Talmud Berakhot 6a

In another baraita **it was taught** that **Abba Binyamin** says: **If the eye was given permission to see, no creature would be able to withstand the** abundance and ubiquity of the **demons** and continue to live unaffected by them.

Similarly, **Abaye said: They are more numerous than we are and they stand over us like mounds of earth surrounding a pit.**

Source 5: Talmud Berakhot 6a

Summarizing the effects of the demons, **Rava said: The crowding at the *kalla*, the gatherings for Torah study during Elul and Adar, is from the demons; those knees that are fatigued even though one did not exert himself is from the demons; those clothes of the Sages that wear out, despite the fact that they do not engage in physical labor, is from friction with the demons; those feet that are in pain is from the demons.**

Source 6: Talmud Berakhot 6a

One who seeks *to know* that the demons exist should place fine ashes around his bed, and in the morning the demons' footprints appear like chickens' footprints, in the ash.

One who seeks *to see* them should take the afterbirth of a firstborn female black cat, born to a firstborn female black cat, burn it in the fire, grind it and place it in his eyes, and he will see them. He must then place the ashes in an iron tube sealed with an iron seal [gushpanka] lest the

demons steal it from him, and then seal the opening so he will not be harmed.

Rav Beivai bar Abaye performed this procedure, saw the demons, and was harmed. The Sages prayed for mercy on his behalf and he was healed.

Source 7: Talmud Berakhot 62a

Because fear of demons in bathrooms was pervasive, the Gemara relates: **Abaye's mother raised a lamb to accompany him to the bathroom.** The Gemara objects: She should have **raised a goat for him.** The Gemara responds: **A goat could be interchanged with a goat-demon.** Since both the demon and the goat are called *sa'ir*, they were afraid to bring a goat to a place frequented by demons.

PART III: MONSTER CASE STUDIES

Source 8: Talmud Kiddushin 29b

The Talmud on Kiddushin 29b, records a fantastic story of a "mazik", (destructive force), which plagued the study hall of Rabbi Abayeh. As the account goes, Rav Yaakov bar Acha, upon witnessing his son's poor Talmudic skills, ventured to this place of study, as he decided that he was more fit to learn than his son. When Abayeh learned of Rav Yaakov bar Acha's upcoming arrival, he urged all townspeople not to offer Rav Yaakov hospitality. Rav Yaakov will thereby be forced to lodge at the study hall, and perhaps a miracle will be



performed for him in his study hall, and he will be spared from this mazik. It was stated that even two students who entered this study hall, even during the day, were at risk due to this mazik. Rav Yaakov stayed in the study hall overnight. During his stay, this mazik appeared to him as a seven-headed serpent, a "tanina" in Aramaic. Rav Yaakov began to pray, and with each bow of his head in prayer (to G-d) one of the serpent's heads fell off. The next morning, Rav Yaakov stated that had it not been for a miracle, he would have been in danger.

Moshe Ben-Chaim's questions of the text:

- 1) Why couldn't Abayeh himself rid the study hall of this mazik?
- 2) What do 7 heads represent?
- 3) Why was this mazik found in the study hall, as opposed to somewhere else?
- 4) Why couldn't R. Yaakov rid it all at once, instead of only one head at each a bow?
- 5) How did prayer remove this mazik?
- 6) Is a mazik a real creature, or is it a metaphor for something else?
- 7) The serpent did not attack Rav Yaakov, or anyone for that matter. What then was the danger?
- 8) Why did Rav Yaakov attribute his success to a miracle? Did he not witness his actions himself?
- 9) What is the meaning of, "even two who enter" and even "by day" are at danger"?
- 10) Why was the mazik also referred to as a "tanina," a serpent?

THE LEVIATHAN; a biblical sea creature
Source 9: Genesis 1:20-21

God said, "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and birds that fly above the earth across the expanse of the sky." God created the



great sea monsters, and all the living creatures of every kind that creep, which the waters brought forth in swarms, and all the winged birds of every kind. And God saw that this was good.

Source 10: Gen. Rabbah 7:4

the...sea monsters: The great fish in the sea, and in the words of the Aggadah (B.B. 74b), this refers to the Leviathan and its mate, for He created them male and female, and He slew the female and salted her away for the righteous in the future, for if they would propagate, the world could not exist because of them. הַתְּיָנִים is written. [I.e., the final "yud," which denotes the plural, is missing, hence the implication that the Leviathan did not remain two, but that its number was reduced to one.]

Discussion

Why would God slay one of the Leviathan but keep one alive?

Source 11: Wikipedia page on the Leviathan (not usually a valid source, but I totally checked this!)

In the Talmud Baba Bathra 75a it is told that the Leviathan will be slain and its flesh served as a feast to the righteous in [the] Time to Come, and its skin used to cover the tent where the banquet will take place. The festival of Sukkot (Festival of Booths) therefore concludes with a prayer recited upon leaving the sukkah (booth): "May it be your will, Lord our God and God of our forefathers, that just as I have fulfilled and dwelt in this sukkah, so may I merit in the coming year to dwell in the sukkah of the skin of Leviathan. Next year in Jerusalem."

Discussion

What is the purpose of creating a sukkah out of the Leviathan's skin?

Source 12: Talmud Avodah Zara 3b

Rav Yehudah said in the name of Rav: The day is comprised of twelve hours.

During the first three hours of each day, the Holy One of Blessing sits and engages in the study of Torah.

During the second three hours of each day, God sits and judges the entire world. Once God sees that the world is deserving of annihilation, God stands up from the Throne of Judgement, and sits instead upon the Throne of Mercy.

During the third three hours of each day, God sits and provides nourishment for the entire world...

During the fourth three hours of each day, God sits and plays with the Leviathan. As it is written, "You formed the Leviathan to sport with it" (Psalm 104:26). Thus we see that God is amused (i.e. laughs) during a portion of every day.

Discussion

What does it mean that the Leviathan is portrayed as both dangerous and a pet of God?