

The Return of the Dybbuk

Between Ritual Healing and Stage Performance

Yoram Bilu



Figure 1. *The Dybbuk* by S. Ansky, with Nava Ziv as Leah. Directed by Hanan Snir, Tel-Aviv, 1998. (Photo by Gerard Alon; courtesy of the Museum Habima Archive)

Introduction

On Thursday evening, 22 April 1999, a *dybbuk* was exorcized by kabbalist Rabbi David Basry in his religious academy, Yeshivat Ha-Shalom, in Jerusalem.¹ The possessed was Yehudit Sigauker, a 38-year-old widow of Indian origin from southern Israel, and the possessing spirit was her late husband. The exorcism was videoed, received extensive media coverage, and stirred a heated debate regarding the authenticity of the case. The public's excitement, short-lived but intense, was understandable: The Jewish variant of spirit possession illness that disappeared from the public eye in the beginning of the 20th century was resurfacing at the end of the millennium. Despite this long suspension, the term “dybbuk” was not foreign to many Israelis. Yet the news of this possession was uncanny; up to that point, most Israelis had only faced the Jewish

1. The term *dybbuk* derives from *davok*, to cling or to cleave in Hebrew.

possession onstage, when they watched or read about one of the many performances of *The Dybbuk* (1917), the popular play by S. Ansky that became the trademark of the Hebrew national theatre, Habima. While they may have had fuzzy notions about the past cases of dybbuk possession and exorcism that had inspired the writing of the play, they were now confronted with a very real and contemporary case. For many Israelis, watching Yehudit's exorcism on their TV screens was akin to a ride in a time machine back to a 19th-century East European *shtetl*. This dual reference of the dybbuk as a cultural ailment requiring ritual-healing performance (exorcism) on the one hand and as a successful stage performance on the other, dramatically converged in the minds of Israelis at the end of the 20th century. I have charted the reciprocal system constituted by the two performative genres of the dybbuk as a three-act drama.

Act I

The Genealogy of the Dybbuk-As-Illness

Jews were possessed by demons as long as two millennia ago, as the bible stories of exorcisms by Jesus demonstrate (Mark 5:1–20), but dybbuk possession, referring specifically to spirits of the dead, emerged only in the mid-16th century. Given how coercive and distressful these possessions were, they were viewed as manifestations of an illness that had to be terminated by exorcism. The first documented cases came from Sephardi communities in Safed, Palestine, and other locales in the circum-Mediterranean (Chajes 2003; Goldish 2003:99–214; Nigal 1983). Only toward the end of the 17th century did the first Ashkenazi cases appear; but in the 18th and 19th centuries most of the cases were in the Ashkenazi communities in Eastern Europe, mainly Hasidic (Nigal 1983:229–63). Cases from the Middle East continued to appear throughout this period as well. The last documented cases appeared in Lithuania, Palestine, and Iraq at the beginning of the 20th century (Bilu 1985; Nigal 1983:45, 186–227).

The reports on dybbuk possession and exorcism embedded in a variety of Jewish religious texts have an overly moralistic tenor. In both the West and the East, the reports dwell on the tribulations of the spirits in the afterworld propelling readers toward repentance and extra-piety (Bilu 1985; Chajes 2003; Goldish 2003; Nigal 1983).

In accounting for the dybbuk's bounded temporal trajectory, I follow Ian Hacking's notion of "transient mental illnesses" (1998). Hacking developed this notion in order to explain how and why dissociative fugue, an ordinarily rare psychiatric disorder involving amnesia of personal identity and unplanned travel or wandering, became an epidemic in fin-de-siècle France. He based his analysis on four vectors, which constitute the "ecological niche" in which a certain psychiatric disorder surges for a limited period in a bounded geographic setting. I employ Hacking's fourfold model to discuss the dybbuk's rise, decline, and eventual resurfacing.

First, for a diagnosis to thrive, it should fit into a *taxonomy*, or system of classification. The dybbuk germinated in the rich cultural soil of Jewish mysticism. In 16th-century Safed and other Mediterranean communities, esoteric notions of kabbalah became exoteric, providing cultural idioms for articulating a wide range of experiences. The kabbalistic doctrines of *gilgul*, the transmigration of souls, introduced in the beginning of the second millennium, and all the more so the doctrine of *ibbur* (impregnation), which was articulated in the second half of the 13th century, together help explain the emergence of the dybbuk. *Ibbur* was an extension of *gilgul*, expanding the general notion of the transmigration of souls in coitus or birth to include the entry of a spirit into a living person *after* he or she was born.

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Dybbuk possession as a rule was the outcome of a bad *ibbur*. The possessing agents were always spirits of the wicked who penetrated humans to avoid the torments of limbo. As spirits of sinners, they were doomed by the celestial court to remain in limbo, wandering between heaven and earth, while being exposed to endless torture by both angelic and demonic forces. Inhabiting humans gave the spirits temporary shelter as well as an opportunity for an improvement in their situation. Minor transgressions committed by the victims-to-be constituted the moral trigger for possession. Without the mystical doctrines of *gilgul* and *ibbur*, the culture-specific ailment of the dybbuk could not be enacted.

From a broader perspective, the growing salience of the mystical doctrines underlying the cultural script of dybbuk possession should be measured against the rise of the individual in early modern Europe, and with it the growing concerns with the body, emotions, and individual consciousness (Chajes 2003; Weinstein [2011] 2016). Lurianic kabbalah,² which thrived in 16th-century Safed (in the Galilee region of Ottoman Syria) and swiftly became influential in other Jewish centers as well, provided a set of religious idioms to cope with these concerns (Fine 2003). Cultivating mystical ideas practiced by Iberian Jews and crypto-Jews after their expulsions from Spain and Portugal at the end of the 15th century, the kabbalists in Safed demanded strict piety of the community, imposing tight control over its members. Fear of sin was a major catalyst for repentance and personal transformation. The growing concern for the fate of the soul in the afterlife and future transmigrations resonated with the emergent sense of individual agency and personal accountability (cloaked in religious vocabulary). Dybbuk possession and exorcism were performative displays of the vicissitudes and tribulations of the soul after death.

Cultural polarity, the second vector in Hacking's scheme, refers to how the behaviors associated with a transient mental illness tend to fall between two social phenomena, one highly esteemed ("virtuous") and the other stigmatized ("vicious"). Hacking situated dissociative fugue between "romantic tourism" and "criminal vagrancy," the first admired and the second feared in late-19th-century France.

Dybbuk possession and exorcism embodies the notion of cultural polarity. Lurianic kabbalah accentuated dualistic conceptions found in Jewish medieval mysticism, depicting the individual as situated between the opposing domains of good and evil, the sacred and the profane, the divine and the demonic. Fusing the metaphysical with the physical, Lurianic kabbalists transformed the human body into a battlefield between these opposing forces. Dybbuk possession is a tangible realization of this dialectic.

The third vector is *observability*: "In order for a form of behavior to be deemed a mental disorder, it has to be strange, disturbing, and noticed" (Hacking 1998:82). The mobility of fugue sufferers made it relatively difficult to track; but with the rise of modern nation-states with checked borders and monitored subjects, people could not disappear just by moving to another place.

The core symptoms of dybbuk possession included agitated and impulsive behavior, convulsions, odd bodily sensations, bizarre vocalizations, speaking in a strange voice (congruent with the spirit's gender), verbal and physical aggression, and dissociation marked by amnesia. This rich behavioral panoply, manifesting the presence of the spirit inside the victim's body, was "noisy," disturbing, and drew a lot of attention. The symptoms became all the more visible during exorcism—a public ritual conducted ordinarily by a revered rabbi in front of a large audience. The preferred arena was the synagogue, where the ritual involved the active employment of Jewish sacred paraphernalia: Torah scrolls were taken from the ark, candles were lit and extinguished, and ram's horns were blown to facilitate the spirit's exit. The ritual was

2. Rabbi Isaac Luria Ashkenazi (1534–1572) was a revered Jewish mystic in the town of Safed. His teachings, known as Lurianic kabbalah, were a major source of influence on Hasidism and other branches of modern Jewish mysticism (Fine 2003; Klein 2005).

conducted in a fixed, graded order, with milder measures of verbal coaxing of the spirit giving way to adjurations and decrees of excommunication, and, as a last resort, to coercive methods of fumigating or beating up the dybbuk's victim in order to make the possessing spirit suffer.

During the structured stages of the ritual, the spirit was compelled to reveal its identity, to confess the sins it committed during its lifetime and punishments received in the afterlife, to specify its terms of departure, to give its consent to leave through a minor organ (usually one of the big toes), and then to depart for good. The tension that accumulated during the stages of the exorcism, particularly when the spirit confessed its sins in life and distressful experiences in the afterlife, was climactically discharged with the spirit's departure. After a successful exorcism the victim immediately regained ordinary consciousness and normal demeanor. A small scar or a sharp pain in the big toe, an exploding sound in the air, or a broken window indicated the dybbuk's departure. The confrontation between the kabbalist-exorcist and the impure spirit, viewed by the participants as the enactment of the battle between good and evil, transmuted the exorcism into a dramatic spectacle. The written reports, which dwelled on the dramatic and moral qualities of the exorcism, were highly popular, strongly impacting readers in remote locales.³ Even though we cannot infer from the documented cases the statistical prevalence of the dybbuk, it seems safe to conclude from the reports that the dybbuk was indeed a "strange, disturbing, and noticed" ailment.

The fourth vector, *release*, indicates that the disorder offers "an inviting escape" to affected people (Hacking 1998:82). Noting the large numbers of French draftees among fugue sufferers, Hacking suggested that the ailment gave them a medical reason to escape military service. As a cultural idiom for articulating distressful experiences (Crapanzano and Garrison 1977; Obeyesekere 1970, 1981, 1990), spirit possession appears particularly apt for coping with traumatic experiences and unacceptable, conflict-precipitating desires. Dybbuk episodes were viewed as manifestations of illness, but since the belief that they were caused by an external entity with a special ontological status was culturally constituted and socially shared, the victim of possession did not suffer the consequences of his or her condition as, say, a Western paranoid does.

As in many other possession illnesses across the globe, women were overrepresented among the victims, while most of the intruding spirits were males. The dominance of this gender pattern can be accounted for both instrumentally and symbolically. Under the protective cover of a powerful, vicious, and impulsive male spirit, women could give vent to gender-specific role stresses, linked to their inferior status in male-dominated societies (Bourguignon 1976, 1979; Lewis [1971] 2003). Symbolically, the act of being penetrated by a male dybbuk and the cohabitation of two entities in one body were metaphorical representations of coitus and pregnancy respectively (Obeyesekere 1981).

The documented cases of dybbuk possession are redolent with sexual themes. The very act of forced intrusion, bespeaking rape; the selection of the vagina as the preferred organ for entry; the blatantly lascivious language of the spirits and the sexual transgressions they confessed during exorcism; their penchant to identify adulterers in the audience—these indicate that the dybbuk was a vehicle for articulating sexual experiences. The controversy over the nature of these experiences is akin to the heated debates over the issue of repressed memories (Loftus and Ketcham 1994; McNally 2003). The classic Freudian approach would view these sexual overtones as reflecting forbidden wishes of young women subject to a patriarchal order that strictly regulated and curtailed their sexual lives (see Bilu 1985). But the vast literature on the significant role of trauma in dissociative disorders warrants a more comprehensive reading. The behavior of the possessed may reflect the escape from traumatic experiences of sexual abuse and

3. For a comprehensive collection of written reports of dybbuk cases see Nigal (1983). Chajes (2003) and Zfatman (2015) present early reports from the Middle East and Europe respectively.

coercion no less than the expression of forbidden sexual desires (see Elijor 2008). Either of these explanations can aptly serve for what Hacking called “release.”

The gradual decrease in dybbuk cases during the second half of the 19th century, until their apparent disappearance in the beginning of the 20th century, had to do with the massive attrition in Jewish traditional ways of life in Europe under the impact of modernization, enlightenment, secularization, and emigration. With the advent of modern science and medicine, and the new, secularized epistemologies they promoted, the mystical taxonomy that gave rise to Jewish possession lost its power. During the dissolution of Jewish traditional life, the dybbuk was one of its first casualties. Note that dybbuk possession was a unique arena where the ontological validity of otherworldly entities had credence. The tangible “sensory” presence of the spirits during exorcism transformed the ritual performance into a dramatic trial that provided evidential confirmation of core tenets of Judaism, such as the immortality of the soul and personal providence. No wonder the secularized intellectuals (Maskilim) of the time viewed the dybbuk as the paradigmatic manifestation of ignorance and superstition, and made it one of their prime targets.

From the mid-19th century on, the dybbuk became a major bone of contention in the struggle between Maskilim and Hasidim in Eastern Europe. The skeptics published satirical pieces in which they shattered the ontological validity of Jewish possession, presenting the rabbi-exorcists as charlatans and the possessed as insane or imposters (Nigal 1983). The Hasidim fought back vehemently, but they too had to admit that the dybbuk was vanishing. Jewish modernists, whether observant or not, forsook the mystical nomenclature underlying the dybbuk, thus disrupting, in Hacking’s terms, the ecological niche in which the dybbuk thrived.

Act II

The Dybbuk as a Stage Performance

The dialectic between the behavioral manifestations of the dybbuk-as-illness and its artistic representation onstage seems obvious. Ansky’s play, *The Dybbuk (Between Two Worlds)*, was written during the second decade of the 20th century, precisely at a time when actual cases of dybbuk possession disappeared from the public eye. It is no wonder, therefore, that the author was drafted into the culture war between modernists and traditionalists. The Hasidim targeted Ansky as an archenemy, tantamount to the evil spirits that not long ago used to possess people. In a Hasidic text he was portrayed as a “heretic (may his name be damned) who transformed [the dybbuk] into a silly, clownish performance in theatres and circuses” (Nigal 1983:14).⁴ This defamatory statement was entirely unwarranted, however, since Ansky’s purpose was not to depreciate or ridicule the Jewish traditional past but to commemorate it.

What were the personal and social circumstances underlying the emergence of the dybbuk in its new, artistic guise? Ansky (the literary name of Shlomo Zanvil Rappoport), born in 1863 in the Russian Empire (now Belarus), was a scion of the new wave of modernization and enlightenment that swept many young Jews in Eastern Europe. His clandestine activities in one of the revolutionary parties in Czarist Russia compelled him to run away to France where, under the impact of the Dreyfus Affair (1894–1906), he returned to his ethnic roots. After his return to Russia in 1905 until his death in Warsaw in 1920 (one month before his play was performed for the first time), Ansky devoted himself to intensive social, cultural, and scholarly activities within the Jewish world (Dvir Goldberg 2013; Safran and Zipperstein 2006; Safran 2010).

Ansky’s vision was to institute a modern, secularized Jewish culture grounded in Jewish heritage and folklore. To that end, he established an ethnographic expedition, which, in the years

4. All translations from Hebrew are my own.



Figure 2. *The Dybbuk* by S. Ansky, with Hana Rovina as Leah. Directed by Yevgeny Vakhtangov. Moscow, 1922. (Courtesy of the Israeli Center for the Documentation of the Performing Arts, Tel-Aviv University)

1912–1914, made several forays to the districts of Vohlin and Podolia in the Pale of Settlement, the area to which Jewish residency was restricted in Russia. The expedition collected thousands of manuscripts, stories, folktales, folksongs, photographs, and artifacts, until World War I put an end to the project (Gonen 2013; Schrire 2016). Acutely aware of the fragility of the Jewish traditional existence in the Pale of Settlement, Ansky viewed his project as salvage ethnography. He sought to save as much material as possible from what he deemed a culture on the verge of extinction. Indeed, the successive upheavals that impacted Eastern European Jewry in the first half of the 20th century—World War I, the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, the civil war in Russia and the pogroms that ensued, and ultimately World War II and the Holocaust—proved Ansky’s vision prophetic.

In spite of the temporal gap between the dybbuk-as-illness and *The Dybbuk*-onstage, it seems obvious that the former nurtured the latter. Dybbuk stories, which the expedition collected, no doubt inspired Ansky in his decision to write the play in the first place and contributed to fashioning its plot. The drama concerns two young lovers, Leah and Khanan, whose love is aborted by Leah’s rich father. Forced to obey her father’s will, Leah is supposed to marry the son of a rich businessman while poor Khanan, maddened by his unfulfilled love for Leah, immerses himself in a dangerous mystical search. Undeterred, he finds his release in death after uttering God’s most esoteric name, the holiness of which he knows to be lethal. Just as Leah is brought to the wedding ceremony, Khanan’s spirit takes possession of her and she collapses, dybbuk-stricken. The wedding has to be postponed and a famous kabbalist is called upon to perform the exorcism. At the end of the ritual, which is the dramatic apex of the play, the dybbuk is expelled but takes Leah’s soul with it while departing. Only then is it revealed that the lovers, now united in death, had been promised to each other in a pact made by their fathers long before they were born.

Aside from the collected dybbuk stories that informed the major plotline (Nigal 1983:146), songs, aphorisms, and phrases from the stock collected by Ansky's expedition were used in the play. Ansky's creativity no doubt elevated the play from a folkloristic patchwork to an existential, mythopoetic drama with a modernist, even "heretical" twist (Chajes 2017). Whereas the traditional case reports celebrated the triumph of the virtuous rabbi-exorcist over the evil spirit, Ansky steers viewers to identify with the agony of the young lovers, trapped in a tragic conflict between romantic self-realization and submission to tradition. In the play, as in the reports, the spirit is expelled and the social order is restored—but at the terrible cost of two young lives. In contrast to the affirmation of conservative values in the traditional reports, Ansky's play bespeaks a different morality, modernist and rebellious, though firmly grounded in the mystical cosmology of the past.

From the outset, Ansky's *Dybbuk* drew critical acclaim and large audiences wherever it was performed, whether in Europe, America, or Palestine, and was ultimately regarded as a classic. The premiere was in 1920 in Warsaw, where the Vilna Troupe performed *The Dybbuk* in Yiddish to great success. Two years later, Habima, a young Moscow troupe led by the great director Yevgeny Vakhtangov, put the play onstage in Hebrew.⁵ As one of the first productions of the emerging Hebrew National Theatre, and its greatest success ever, Habima's *Dybbuk* attained near mythical status as a significant milestone in the renaissance of modern Jewish culture (Rokem 1996, 2009; Zer-Zion 2009).

When Habima moved to Palestine in 1931 after a short visit in 1928 and a lengthy tour of Europe and the United States, *The Dybbuk* was reframed as a Zionist national symbol, emblematic of the cultural revival of the Jewish people in their homeland (Kaynar 2009; Rokem 1996; Zer-Zion 2009).⁶ The ongoing vitality of *The Dybbuk*, manifested in endless productions and adaptations, stems from its multilayered symbolism: as a modernist play in the genre of fantastic realism; as a *lieux de memoire* for the lost Jewish world; as a reflection of Jewish identity torn between modernism and tradition; and finally, as a core Zionist symbol.

Ansky's ethnographic project, which served as the mediating link between the dybbuk-as-illness (possession) and dybbuk-as-ritual (exorcism) and *The Dybbuk*-as-play, was motivated by an acute sense of impending doom; yet this very sense of a vanishing world paved the way for the new artistic sensibilities that gave birth to the play. The aesthetic distance required for creating the theatre's enchanted (yet illusory) reality was only possible when the spirits became transparent, having lost their ontological validity. The fascination of varied audiences, not necessarily Jewish, apparently stemmed from the expressionistic spectacle Vakhtangov so ingeniously put onstage, as well as from the universal existential dilemmas the play invoked under its mystical attire. But the enthusiasm of Jewish audiences, whether Yiddish speakers in Warsaw and Vilna, pioneers in the socialist communes in Palestine (Rokem 2009), or emigrants in New York (Nachshon 2009), was probably more specifically linked to their enchantment with the receding past, which Ansky momentarily revived onstage: a nostalgic voyage-in-time to the families and communities of whom many of the viewers were descendants.

At least in Israel (then Palestine), where the emerging community of "new Jews" sought to build a national home by breaking away from the Diaspora, negating its values, the enthusiastic acceptance of the reenacted past onstage invoked ambivalent responses on the part of

5. In translating the play from Yiddish to Hebrew, the great poet Hayim Nahman Bialik made it more festive (Shamir 2009).

6. "Through the *Dybbuk*, Habima created an identity-performance of young East European Jews moving between the traditional world and the modern world, between the Hasidic orbit and the Zionist revival. Even though the play had no reference whatsoever to the Zionist question, it constituted the Zionist symbolism of *Habima*" (Zer-Zion 2009:74).

intellectuals and opinion leaders. In 1926, even before the arrival of Habima in Tel-Aviv, the success of a local production of *The Dybbuk* led the Association of Hebrew Writers to put *The Dybbuk* on a public trial, conducted in front of thousands of viewers (Appelfeld 2009). The issue at stake was whether it was appropriate to perform *The Dybbuk* in the first Hebrew city. The gist of the prosecutor's arguments was that Ansky brought back to center stage the diasporic past and its backward-looking traditions, from which the new community in Palestine sought to dissociate itself.

The jury, the prosecutor, the defense attorney, and the witnesses, all known literary figures, could not miss the idiomatic equivalence between the play and the trial. They indulged in tropes that collapsed the gap between the two performative genres likening Ansky's *Dybbuk* to an intruding spirit that had to be exorcized. Just as the spirit of Khanan took possession of Leah, so too on the collective level the play as the specter of the Eastern European diasporic past came to haunt the new, future-oriented community in the Eastern Mediterranean. In this sense, the public trial was an exorcism of a sort, with the prosecutor in the role of healer-exorcist. Was the fact that the judges ruled that Ansky's *Dybbuk* could continue to be performed a tacit acknowledgment that the exorcism had failed? That a total war against the past, tarnished and despised as it might be, was futile? Despite all efforts to erase it, the past always leaves traces (memories, possessions, unfinished business), with which it can infiltrate the present, thus establishing a presence within it.

Blurring the border between past and present is emblematic of spirit possession at large—a phenomenon where the living and the dead are coeval (Lambek 1993). United in the body of the possessed, they occupy the same temporal plane, defying the linear flow of time and the separation between the living and the dead. The alternate title of Ansky's play, "Between Two Worlds," refers to this border crossing: the spirits are in a liminal position, oscillating between heaven and earth. But *The Dybbuk* as a stage performance also obscured the temporal border by confronting modern viewers with a discarded past. And many of these viewers were probably internally conflicted themselves, torn between the vision of a new life and the painful memories of forsaken homes and parents. In Derrida's intriguing terms (Derrida [1993] 1994), which Batya Appelfeld cogently employed in her analysis of the public trial (Appelfeld 2009), the disruption of past ontologies reverberates in the present in the form of hauntologies. Indeed, in the case of dybbuk possession, the vanquished spirits did not vanish altogether. In the last analysis, the dead are stronger than the living. Exorcized twice, from their victims' bodies when the dybbuk existed as actual possession illness and from the secularized and disenchanting modern world at large, they resurfaced as specters—Freud's uncanny other (Freud [1917] 2003)—haunting the viewers of Ansky's play. The fact that the Israeli theatre keeps performing *The Dybbuk* in various adaptations and artistic genres every decade or so over the past 50 years serves as an apt illustration of Derrida's hauntology.

Act III

The Return of the Dybbuk

Before going back to Yehudit's dybbuk, a caveat is in order. Given the small number of new cases, we cannot say for sure that the old Jewish possession is back to stay. Nor can we discount the possibility that during the 20th century dybbuk cases recurred but did not reach the public eye. What is at stake here is precisely the fact that the case of Yehudit won a lot of public attention. In the same vein, irrespective of the actual frequency of dybbuk cases in previous centuries, we know that the documented cases had high social impact, given the public nature of the exorcism rituals, the oral transmission of dybbuk stories, and, most importantly, the wide circulation of the published stories. The impact of the new cases, sparse as they have been, could be further intensified by modern media technologies, as the case of Yehudit amply shows.

Unlike the old cases, studied exclusively through texts written by the exorcist or his associates, Yehudit and her significant others were available for inquiry. I did not attend the exorcis-

tic ritual at Yeshivat Ha-Shalom, but I did meet Yehudit a few weeks after the event and have interviewed her at length several times since then. As a token of the growing rapport between us, Yehudit gave me a videocassette of her exorcism, which I minutely scrutinized. I also interviewed two of Yehudit's sisters and one of her daughters. Unfortunately, I could not convince Rabbi Basry, the exorcist, to collaborate.

The information thus gained could shed light on various aspects of spirit possession, about which past reports ordinarily remained mute. One such aspect was Yehudit's personal history and the circumstances that led to her ailment. Yehudit's family immigrated to Israel from southern India when she was two years old. She grew up in Dimona, a peripheral town in southern Israel, under shaky economic conditions, married at 17 without completing high school, and in the following 13 years gave birth to eight children. The family was highly dysfunctional from the outset. Yehudit's husband was an alcoholic and gambler who abused his wife and children and lived on social welfare. Yehudit had to provide for the family by working as a cleaner in local schools. Her two older sons drifted into delinquency and drug abuse and served long terms in prison. Yehudit maintains that she harbored love for her husband despite his abusive and parasitic behavior. From time to time, when family feuds became too much to take, she would run away to her parents' home, but she always came back. When the municipal welfare agency offered to put her in a shelter for battered women, she refused. Facing enormous difficulties, Yehudit found some comfort in religion and over the years became more observant.

In 1997, Yehudit's husband was told to go to the hospital for acute liver cirrhosis. He refused to leave home, but eventually relented, after Yehudit promised him that she would take care of him in the hospital. The husband soon fell into a coma, but Yehudit kept her word, visited him every day, and dutifully watched over him. She could not forgive herself, however, that she was away from the hospital when he passed away.

A few months later, Yehudit and her children started to feel the late husband's presence at home, first through odd sensations of voices, shades, and movement of objects; and later when the husband's spirit started to take possession of Yehudit and speak through her mouth. He demanded his sons say the mourner's prayer (*Kaddish*) and read from Psalms in order to usher his soul to heaven, threatening to take their mother with him if they refused. He also beseeched them to quit their involvement with drugs and other criminal behavior. Yehudit herself did not remember the possession episodes, but all attendants noted in dismay how accurately she enacted the late husband's typical form of speech, bodily gestures, and hot-tempered demeanor. During these episodes, she tried to put on his clothes and urinate like a male, drank alcohol, and even chased her children with a knife.

After several attempts by various healers to get rid of the intruding spirit failed, two local activists of Shas, the Sephardi-orthodox party,⁷ contacted Rabbi David Basry, a known kabbalist specializing in the mystical practice of rectification of souls (*tikkun*), and asked for his intervention. Upon Basry's suggestion, the activists brought Yehudit, accompanied by her parents and two sons, to his religious academy in Jerusalem. The exorcism, more than three hours long, took place in the packed synagogue of the yeshiva.

Since Yehudit's exorcism was planned, Rabbi Basry and his staff could carefully design the ritual setting. They arranged for kabbalists and religious students to participate in the prayers and incantations; for two teams of photographers to video the exorcism; and for ultraorthodox radio stations to live broadcast the ritual's high points. Many passersby poured into the

7. Shas was founded in 1984. It primarily represents the interests of ultraorthodox Sephardi Jews, although the party's population includes Mizrahi Jews (of Middle Eastern and North African ancestry) who are less strictly observant or traditional. In the national elections of May 1999, conducted just a few weeks after Yehudit's exorcism, Shas won 17 seats in the Israeli parliament—the party's greatest success ever. Shas deftly used Yehudit's videoed exorcism in the election campaign (Peled 2001).

synagogue following the exciting rumors that the long-gone dybbuk was back. When Yehudit arrived with her family, she was seated on a sofa adjacent to the holy ark, with her parents on one side and her children on the other. Rabbi Basry stood in front of her, separating the seated family from the crowd. Yehudit was in her ordinary consciousness, albeit dazed and confused, therefore Rabbi Basry had to summon the spirit into her body. Having learned that some of her previous possession episodes had been triggered by reciting Psalms (the sanctity of which provoked the spirit to inhabit Yehudit), he ordered her to read from the Book of Psalms. Upon reading, Yehudit started to tremble and twitch—clear indications of the spirit’s proximity—but the spirit remained unresponsive, despite the Rabbi’s attempts to address it. Only when Rabbi Basry moved from third-person terms (“What does the spirit want? He is not allowed to disturb her”) to second-person (“I am talking to you, the spirit”), did Yehudit close her eyes and let the book fall from her hands.

The loud uproar in the packed synagogue turned into electrifying silence when Rabbi Basry ordered the spirit to reveal its identity. Stunningly the name of Yehudit’s husband came out from her mouth, loud and clear, in a distinctively coarse male voice. In the interrogation that ensued, the spirit reported that it had been persecuted by demons for its sins, but remained evasive about the nature of these sins. Only after repeated questions did the spirit admit reluctantly that it had been an alcoholic and desecrated the Sabbath. When asked why it was harassing Yehudit, the answer was straightforwardly brutal: “I came to take her with me”; but the reason for it was tinged with empathy: “because she suffers so much.” At the end of a tense verbal exchange, the spirit was led to regret its sins and asked for repentance and “ascent” in order to ameliorate its status in the afterworld. The introductory part of the exorcism ended when the spirit was made to utter its readiness to depart.

Given the treacherous nature of the intruding spirits, the dybbuk’s verbal submission had to be cemented and implemented by a rich array of ritual measures, which constituted the gist of the exorcism. Rabbi Basry, swaying over the seated woman, showered her with prayers and incantations designed to rectify the dybbuk and propel its departure. From time to time he withdrew to the synagogue’s pulpit and enflamed the crowd with the moral lessons just garnered from the unfolding scene, calling for repentance and remorse. In his emotional discourse, Rabbi Basry deftly alternated between heartfelt moaning and sobbing, impassioned entreaties for repentance (“Big cry from Jerusalem: there are souls around, there are spirits, they are punished for their sins...”), and high-pitched threats launched at the recalcitrant spirit. Orchestrated by the exorcist, the crowd actively took part in the ritual, joining in the prayers and psalms, and lighting candles to rectify the dybbuk.

While the dialogue with the dybbuk stopped when the inquiry was over, its vocal and embodied presence was strongly felt throughout the ritual. The energy level of the dybbuk was clearly calibrated to match the exorcist’s level of expressivity. In the less excited parts of the exorcism, Yehudit sprawled on the sofa, eyes shut and almost motionless, as if asleep or in a coma. But in the “hot” parts, when the exorcist raised his voice in pleas and shouts, swaying animatedly over Yehudit, she became agitated, moaned and cried, and contorted violently. Her spasms grew wild toward the climactic end of the exorcism, when the dybbuk was commanded to exit through one of her big toes, and a ritual quorum of 10 blew ram’s horns to induce the spirit to comply. The uproar in the synagogue at these moments was deafening; and Yehudit, covered with a blanket to safeguard her modesty, rolled violently on the floor, pressing her palms to her ears in a desperate attempt to stop the vocal assault. When the turmoil was over, she was assisted to her place on the sofa and slowly regained her senses. To make sure that the spirit had indeed departed, Rabbi Basry asked her again to recite a chapter from the Book of Psalms. Looking exhausted yet reassured, this time she read from the book in a loud firm voice, without trembling a bit. Rabbi Basry declared her cured and the crowd responded with songs and shouts of elation.

Put succinctly, the reemergence of Jewish possession after so many years cannot be divorced from the significant sociocultural and political changes that Israel has undergone in recent

years. The secularized collectivist and statist ideologies that guided Israel in its formative years declined as the country became more Jewish and more traditionally inclined. The ascent of Jewish orthodoxy, of national-religious sentiments, and more pertinently, of popular religious practices related to kabbalah (Bilu 2010) have all contributed to the ecological niche in which the dybbuk could germinate again. In order to understand why it was Yehudit in particular who became the paradigmatic case of the new wave of dybbuk possession, we have to zoom in on her individual life circumstances.

To assume the role of the possessed and to enact it adequately, Yehudit had to be familiar, at least rudimentarily, with the spirit world.⁸ One possible source for this knowledge were popular preachers whose live, audiotaped, and broadcasted talks included vivid depictions of the fate of souls in the afterlife (Bilu and Goodman 1997). Yehudit was exposed to such talks as she became more observant. No less important was her Indian background. Even though she was a young child when she came to Israel, she grew up speaking Marathi at home, and her family preserved much of their Indian culture. More to the point, Yehudit had at her disposal a domestic model of possession, as stories of male spirits that penetrated female relatives were told and retold in the family. In addition, she was an avid consumer of Indian movies, where popularized versions of Hindu cosmology, with its porous boundaries between gods, demons, and humans, included flamboyant cases of possession. Yehudit's sisters believed that her susceptibility to possession was reinforced by her personality. They described her as easygoing, lively, impressionable, and naïve, and also as a born performer, a good dancer, and a skilled imitator.⁹

What were the motivational bases for Yehudit's dybbuk? Yehudit herself, reflecting upon her situation in my interview with her, emphasized the instrumental side of her possession episodes: "He [the husband] gave me power, he tried to put things in order; I could control my children then" (Sigauker 2017). From a psychodynamic perspective, it seems that her ambivalent relationship with her husband was a major causative factor. That the couple's relations were ambivalent could be understood from the late husband's oxymoronic excuse for taking possession of his widow. He came to take her to the world of the dead, he claimed, just because he cared for her, empathizing with her suffering.

Yehudit loved her husband and cared for him despite his abusive behavior. She felt guilty for being away from the hospital when he died and, well aware of his many transgressions, was seriously concerned with the fate of his soul in the afterworld. Whether or not the possession episodes articulated Yehudit's fantasy to be intimately reunited with the late husband, by becoming one with him she created the opportunity for rectifying his soul and ushering it to a heavenly refuge. Dreams reported to Yehudit by her children long after the exorcism, in which their father appeared to them in good health, well-dressed, and content, contributed to her assurance that eventually his soul found itself a resting place in heaven.

Yehudit's dybbuk made the headlines in Israel's dailies and magazines, and on TV news programs. The public controversy that erupted was marked by two moral crusades, which intriguingly resonated with the fin-de-siècle culture war between Hasidim and modernists 100 years earlier. The controversy accentuated the theatricality inherent in dybbuk possession and further blurred the gap between ritual and stage performances.

8. Since the dybbuk is steeped in Jewish kabbalistic doctrines, it seems unlikely that someone entirely estranged from Jewish mysticism could properly enact the role of the possessed. But the familiarity with these doctrines should not be overstated, since the structured inquiry by the exorcist, with its highly suggestive questions, could prompt the possessed to the "right," culturally appropriate answers, even without their knowledge of the traditions. I believe that the spirit's laconic and evasive replies during Yehudit's exorcism stemmed from her very meager knowledge of kabbalah but also from her unwillingness to betray intimate matters related to her husband's abusive behavior.

9. The sisters, whom I interviewed in their homes in Dimona a few weeks after the exorcism, suspected that Yehudit's dybbuk was not authentic.

The first crusade was initiated by religious activists mostly associated with Shas. The two activists who made the connection between Yehudit's family and Rabbi Basry and brought her to his yeshiva were low-level functionaries in the party. Rabbi Basry is closely related to Shas's rabbinical leadership. Shas's central role in the exorcism and its aftermath was related to the party's strong involvement with folk-mystical and magical practices designed to attract traditional voters of Mizrahi background. The party's political leader, Aryeh Deri, enlisted charismatic kabbalists to that end, despite the reservations of Shas founder and spiritual authority, Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef. During the 1998 municipal elections campaign, Shas circulated thousands of copies of a special amulet prepared by the country's oldest living kabbalist, Rabbi Itzhak Kadouri. The heated "amulets controversy" that erupted, at the end of which Shas was ordered by the Central Elections Committee to stop delivering amulets as part of its campaign, could be seen as a forerunner of the dybbuk controversy one year later. The national elections scheduled for 17 May 1999 found the party in a problematic situation, since its leader, Deri, was brought to court for taking bribes. The exorcism of the dybbuk by Rabbi Basry, which took place less than four weeks before the elections, was in this unfavorable situation an asset that could not be left unheeded.¹⁰

From the outset, Rabbi Basry and his aides carefully designed the exorcistic ritual as a morality play with a fixed script that was based on a manual of exorcism that had been passed down through the kabbalist's family,¹¹ complete with assigned roles and stage décor. We have no evidence that Rabbi Basry and Yehudit had discussed their respective roles prior to the exorcism. Yet the fact that she was the only actor with no or just fuzzy knowledge of what was expected of her further fueled the public debate regarding the dybbuk's ontology.

Both the theatrical elements in Yehudit's exorcism and the orchestrated moral campaign to bring people back to the fold following it had their precedents in dybbuk cases from previous centuries. But the modern context of the new case, with all of the available media, no doubt amplified the "show" aspect of the exorcism and with it the political dimensions of possession. Reporters of an ultraorthodox radio station delivered breaking news from the unfolding exorcism. Many people listened to the live broadcast of the drama with immediacy and urgency, as they were beseeched to repent at once. One of the reporters described what he saw: "You can't imagine, dear listeners, what is going on right now in the yeshiva. In this very moment the woman is in frenzy, trembling all over, the spirit acts madly in her body, just as the prayer to expel it from the big toe started."¹² The exorcist's son, an aspiring young kabbalist himself, also reported from the scene on the same radio station:

It is horrifying to see the woman rolling on the floor, seized with pain, and the spirit moving back and forth inside her body [...E]very second another organ gets swollen, and her legs are in terrible pain. He [the spirit] wanted to leave but then came back and tried to strangle her. [...] It's absolutely dreadful. [...] I am very excited talking to you this moment because all of us, old and young, are sitting and crying like babies, making confessions, and at this very moment she fell down on the floor [...].

10. Rabbi Basry interrogated the dybbuk about Deri's trial, hoping to gain a public announcement that he was innocent. Embarrassingly the spirit insisted that Deri was guilty. This exchange was omitted from the videoed exorcism, but was reaffirmed by the interviewees.

11. Rabbi Yehuda Fetaya, Rabbi Basry's maternal grandfather, was a famous kabbalist and exorcist in Baghdad (Bilu 1979). His book *Min'hat Yehuda* (Juda's Gift [1933] 1959) includes vivid depictions of exorcisms he conducted in Baghdad in the beginning of the 20th century.

12. The reporters' quotations and the quote from exorcist's son were transcribed from an audiocassette of the live broadcast from a Haredi radio station, Arutz (channel) 2000, in collaboration with Radio Kol Halev, from 22 April 1999.

The reporters' live accounts had their desired effect: many listeners contacted radio stations to make impassioned vows to repent.

The impact of Yehudit's exorcism spread further when the audio- and videocassettes of the ritual were released. Since the exorcism took place a few weeks before the 15th national election, the videos were screened in political rallies organized by Shas as well as in religious convocations designed to bring followers back to the fold. Politics and religion fused as the moral messages invoked in these two settings overlapped. Edited and abridged, the audio- and videocassettes became popular items for sale at mass gatherings and transformed Yehudit into a reluctant celebrity, the star of a show, the consequences of which she could not foresee.

Yehudit, who remained amnesic about the exorcistic ritual, told me she was upset when she saw her "performance" onscreen. At first, her embarrassment was mitigated by the flattering appeal of being center stage, under the limelight, enacting a complementary role to Rabbi Basry in the exorcism. She even entertained the hope that Rabbi Basry would draft her to talk in public about the moral lessons derived from her dramatic experiences as dybbuk. But when people on the street started to avoid her or called her crazy she realized how stigmatic were the consequences of the videoed exorcism, and her pride turned into rage and bitterness. The notoriety she unwillingly won made her run away to another town and go into hiding. Whenever she had to go out, she would put on a wig and heavy makeup to avoid being recognized. In her despair, she threatened to sue the distributors of the videotapes for infringing on her privacy. The distributors responded by offering her a monetary reward for giving away the rights to which she was entitled as the unwilling "star" of the possession video. She grudgingly accepted, but the compensation was too small and came too late to forestall her general sense of frustration and discontent.

In this unfortunate state of affairs, Yehudit found herself involved in the counter-crusade against the authenticity of the dybbuk issued by anticlerical politicians, journalists, and academics. The spearhead of the crusade against the dybbuk was the daily *Haaretz*, the bastion of secular liberalism in Israel, which decried the return of the dybbuk as emblematic of the irrationality and religious fundamentalism that had spread throughout the country in recent years. Seeking to undermine the ontological validity of the dybbuk, a *Haaretz* reporter managed to locate Yehudit in her hiding place and interviewed her there. Yehudit, feeling exploited and stigmatized by the exorcist and his partners, was easily coaxed into embracing a skeptical perspective. She claimed that she was entirely clueless about the nature of the exorcism when she was brought into the synagogue. Confused and stressed, she thought that the best way to come out of the situation was by complying with Rabbi Basry's queries, "I felt as if I were hypnotized," she argued. In order to prove the inauthenticity of her dybbuk, Yehudit voluntarily emitted the same vocalizations that the spirit supposedly made during the exorcism. *Haaretz* put the vocalizations on its website to prove that they could not be discerned from the dybbuk's original utterances. The newspaper triumphantly concluded that Yehudit's dybbuk was a fake (Bar-Mocha 1999).

The secularized liberal attempt to exorcize the dybbuk from the collective body of Israeli society was complicated by yet another twist in the plot. Upset by the dire conditions of her underground life and frightened by the rabbi's threats that the dybbuk might come back to harass her, Yehudit began to rethink the skeptic perspective she had adopted earlier. A reconciliation meeting with Rabbi Basry paved her way back to the believers' camp.

For the skeptics, both the rabbi's threats and the monetary reward were just another indication that Yehudit's possession and exorcism were fabricated—nothing but a cynical ploy to preserve irrational beliefs. My perspective is more equivocal. Following Ian Hacking again, I tend to view Yehudit's dybbuk as "real" even if not "true." In other words, I would like to avoid the ontological certitude of either doubters or believers and approach the issue at stake epistemologically, seeking to understand the attributional processes through which Yehudit articulated her incoherent experiences as dybbuk.

First, the assumption that Yehudit's dybbuk was a sheer fabrication, the outcome of collusion with the exorcist, seems incompatible with the multiple reports that her possession episodes had started spontaneously at home, before she met with the religious activists who led her to Rabbi Basry. Second, Yehudit's description of her condition when she was brought to Rabbi Basry strikes me as plausible, reflecting a sincere attempt to make sense of an incoherent situation. Feeling ill at ease and disoriented in front of the crowd in the synagogue, a foreign and unknown territory to her, she focused on and easily succumbed to the exorcist's queries and suggestions as a point of reference.

In the absence of semantic categories such as "trance" or "dissociation," Yehudit cogently employed the popular idiom of hypnosis to depict her vague experiences. But was she really "entranced" or "hypnotized"? It cannot be denied that Yehudit was fully awake when the exorcism began; and she closed her eyes almost "by invitation," precisely when Rabbi Basry addressed the spirit directly for the first time. But even if she were fully awake at the initial phase of the exorcism (as hypnotic subjects are at the beginning of their induction), she appeared entirely out of her senses two hours later, when she was convulsing and rolling violently on the floor. Admittedly, even this deranged performance and the ensuing amnesia could be staged; but the boundary between "staged" and "authentic" is not always easy to demarcate.

From a social psychology perspective, specifically role theory, the seemingly distinctive behaviors under hypnosis do not reflect a "special," neurologically traceable state of consciousness but rather normal social psychological processes of role-taking emitted in response to conformity-enhancing cues from an authority figure in a carefully designed setting (Sarbin 1995; Spanos 1989). In this sense, these behaviors are not different from other role enactments, which, as the building blocks of the interface between individual and society, are constitutive of the interactional matrix we call social reality (Parsons 1951). Yehudit's self-reflections fit within this scheme. From a performance studies perspective, the practices through which actors onstage merge with their roles via processes of identification and absorption, particularly in the Stanislavski method, are no less serious and "real" than other role enactments, including Yehudit's in the exorcistic ritual. Stanislavski's instructions to actors bear surprising resemblance to hypnotic manuals (Stanislavski [1938] 2008).

Finding ourselves in the theatre again, it is interesting to note that Yevgeny Vakhtangov was Stanislavski's student, even though he moved on to develop his own system before he became the director of Habima's *Dybbuk* in Moscow. It should be noted that, among other differences between the respective roles of the possessed onstage and in the synagogue, Leah's role was far more structured than Yehudit's.¹³ While the exorcistic ritual was well defined, it did not provide Yehudit with a clear script. Caught between two moral crusades, she did her best to make sense of her incoherent situation, looking for clues wherever she could find them and changing her allegiances—from credulous to skeptic and back—with changing circumstances.

The Two Faces of the *Dybbuk* and the Dialectics of Healing

The Dybbuk-as-play occupied center stage precisely at the time when the dybbuk-as-illness disappeared from the public eye. Only with the disenchantment of the Jewish traditional world, when the spirits became transparent, could the aesthetic distance required for creating the theatre's enchanted reality be established. However, transparency can be haunting even though (or precisely because) it is just the presence of absence. Even if the ontological certainties that

13. Beyond the obvious fact that Leah's role was precisely defined by the playscript, it was played by the same actress, Hana Rovina, the first lady of the Hebrew theatre, in exactly the same way for about half a century (Tartakowski 2009).

nurtured dybbuk cases in the past were ruptured, their shadows, the specter of specters, might return to haunt us.

The recent return of the dybbuk-as-illness is an illustration of the dynamic flow and changeability of historical processes and cultural milieus. In hindsight, as Israeli society became more Jewish and mystically oriented, it gradually grew more receptive to the cultural ecology in which dybbuk possession could thrive again. Hauntology has paved the way back to ontology. It seems unlikely that the ongoing popularity of the canonical play in itself kept the specter of dybbuk possession alive throughout the 20th century. It *is* possible, however, that this popularity had a more nuanced and indirect effect, bolstering the connotative breadth and cognitive salience of the dybbuk as a semantic category and making it an available cultural idiom for contemporary Israelis.¹⁴ In other words, through the mediation of Ansky's play, the dybbuk remained "in the air" even for people like Yehudit who never set a foot in the theatre.

Turning the limelight on the exorcism as a therapeutic ritual highlights the multidimensionality and dialectical nature of the healing process in dybbuk possession in all its complexity. The exorcism of Yehudit can be evaluated in this respect against the background of the previous case reports as well as Ansky's play. As a traditional variant of individual therapy, Yehudit's exorcism appears as a success story. This has been true for most of the previous case reports, where the expulsion of the intruding spirits put an end to the victims' agonizing dissociative state and associated symptoms, and restored them to their normal, premorbid selves. Admittedly, the representability of our corpus is suspect given the all-too-familiar tendency to publicize successful cases and ignore failures. But it makes sense to assume that the emotionally charged and highly structured ritual performance of the exorcism, based on a widely shared cultural logic, had the suggestive power to extricate many victims from their acute distress. Far beyond granting the possessing spirits ontological validity, this cultural logic authoritatively dictated the sequence of steps designed to rectify the spirits and situate them where they ultimately belonged according to accepted cosmological premises. As indicated by the prefix "ex" in exorcism, the "natural" (that is, culturally enjoined) location of the possessing spirit is outside the victim's body.

Students of possession embracing the naturalist-instrumental paradigm (Bourguignon 1976, 1979; de Heusch 1981; Lewis [1971] 2003) have claimed that under the aegis of the intruding spirits, the possessed could give vent to otherwise inexpressible experiences of forbidden wishes and traumatic memories. Thus, the very articulation of the distressful experiences through the idiom of the dybbuk in possession episodes—even before exorcism was performed—might have had therapeutic value. The traditional case reports are redolent with sexual, aggressive, antireligious, and other "deviant" or subversive themes, embedded in the intruding spirit's discourse and behavior; and it makes sense to assume, from a psychological perspective, that this verbal acting out was cathartic in nature. In addition, according to the reports, some of the possessed entertained significant "secondary gains" by becoming the focus of attention, by eliciting sentiments of pity and awe, and by being cared for.

Yehudit's case gives us the opportunity to contemplate further the therapeutic value of dybbuk possession, irrespective of the exorcistic ritual. On the instrumental level, the spirit's presence in her body, albeit compulsory and noxious, gave her more leeway to confront her children and keep them at bay. No less important, the exorcism gave her a chance to ameliorate and rectify her husband's spiritual status in heaven, about which she was highly concerned. She was much less successful, however, in her attempts to garner symbolic capital by transforming herself into a respectable moral agent, serving to bring people back to the fold. The gap between

14. In discussing a present-day dybbuk case, Tamar Alexander notes: "As a consequence of the popularity of the Yiddish drama written by S. An-ski [...], *The Dybbuk*, and its Hebrew translation by H.N. Bialik, both the term and the phenomenon became widely disseminated, along with the Hebrew idiom, *A dybbuk has possessed him/her*" (2003:309).

Yehudit's symptomatic relief following exorcism and her failure to improve her socioeconomic status and get rid of the stigma she contracted problematizes the meaning and implications of healing in exorcism at large. It might be argued, from a feminist perspective, that the very success of the ritual, ending with the expulsion of the spirit, is self-destructive. The daring attempt of the female victim to break out of her gendered role confines, under the protective cover of the profligate male spirit, ends with pushing her back to the restricted domestic territory allotted to her in a patriarchal society. Exorcism, performed by a male specialist, is about muting the voice the possessed was granted by the intruding spirit (Elior 2008).

The therapeutic aspects of the exorcism are further problematized in Ansky's play, as Leah, the protagonist, meets her death at the end of the ritual. Death of the possessed following exorcism did appear in the traditional reports; but it was an uncommon phenomenon, limited to three early cases (Bilu 1985), although in others, including Yehudit's, the spirit threatened to kill its host. Unlike in these cases, Leah's death, grounded as it is in the modernist and romantic ethos of Ansky's play, takes the feminist logic to fruition. Leah defies the patriarchal order and aborts the arranged marriage imposed on her by her father by choosing to unite herself with her lover in the land of the dead. In *The Dybbuk*, the loving bond between Leah and Khanan that recurred—albeit with a lot of ambivalence—in the case of Yehudit and her late husband draws the two female protagonists close to each other. This kind of affectionate attachment between victim and spirit is unique among possession cases reported since the 16th century.

Note also that in both cases, the possession episodes were precipitated by a violated promise—a motif almost nonexistent in the traditional corpus. Leah's father disregarded the pact of matrimony he had made with Khanan's father long before the two lovers were born. Yehudit could not forgive herself for not keeping her promise to stay near her moribund husband's bed until the end. In being reunited with her husband during the possession episodes, Yehudit gave vent to her wish to reintegrate him—at least temporarily, before rectifying his soul and launching it to heaven—into the family framework he had left prematurely (see Caciola 2016). Leah seemed to entertain a similar sentiment—bonding with her dead lover—but went further by transforming this bonding into a permanent state in the kingdom of the dead.

The social implications of the exorcism were too far-reaching to be exhausted at the level of individual therapy. Whether or not the possessed were “really cured” by the expulsion of the invading spirits, the exorcistic ritual was a moral theatre, a captivating drama where good and evil, the sacred and the profane, the living and the dead vividly collided. As such, the exorcism evolved in many cases, from the 16th century onward, into an exciting spectacle, with a strong impact on the viewers. The spirits' recitations during the ritual constituted a dramatic evidential confirmation for the basic tenets of Judaism, such as the immortality of souls and the principle of personal providence. In this way, through a peculiar collusion between the exorcist and the possessed, deviant behaviors could be used as conformity-enhancing devices, urging people to repent. The revivalist sentiments and spiritual reawakening experienced by the viewers of dybbuk exorcism and the readers of the reports could be deemed part of a broader healing process that affected the community as a whole—at least from the perspective of the rabbinical authorities.

As the case of Yehudit amply shows, when the dybbuk returned at the end of the 20th century, its inherent rhetorical and moral dimensions could be further amplified by advanced media technology. People all over Israel could hear, in the live radio broadcast, high moments from Yehudit's exorcism. Later on, they could watch the videocassettes of the exorcism at home or on giant screens in religious and political rallies. TV news programs and newspaper articles brought Yehudit's story to many homes, transforming it into a reality (or super-reality) show with clear moral lessons. These conservative, conformity-enhancing moral lessons were absent from the stage performance of *The Dybbuk*, the tenor of which was modernist, romantic, and rebellious.

Finally, it is interesting to note that while the manual for exorcizing the dybbuk remained quite fixed throughout the centuries and across Jewish ethnocultural groups, the case of Yehudit seems to reflect the hybridity and multiculturalism of present-day Israel. The possessed was of Indian ancestry; her dybbuk was probably nurtured by popular movies from Bollywood as well as by popular sermons by kabbalists; the exorcist was a mystically oriented rabbi of Iraqi-Baghdadi extraction, and the Sephardi-Orthodox political party of Shas was the prime mover behind the amplification and wide circulation of the case. The Hasidic-Ashkenazi connotations that were long-associated with dybbuk possession remained only onstage.

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