

Introduction

The popular understanding of the *dybbuk* concept is associated with the play *Between Two Worlds*, better known as *The Dybbuk*, written by the Russian revolutionary activist and Jewish ethnographer Shlomo Zanvil Rapoport (1862–1920), better known by his pen name, S. Anski.¹ It was influenced by the ethnographic expedition he led from 1912 through 1914 to Volhynia and Podolia to study and preserve the Jewish folk traditions that were rapidly disappearing.² The conventional wisdom is that the expedition provided the raw material that inspired the play. The play was first presented a month after Anski's death and two years later in a Hebrew translation. It became a great success, translated into many languages, and is considered the greatest Yiddish play of the twentieth century.³ Of greater importance for this study is that the play with its ethnographic folkloristic patina came to define the concept of the *dybbuk*, not only for popular audiences but also for much that has been written about this subject. Many scholarly and popular studies of the *dybbuk* assume that Anski's play was an accurate representation of the popular folk beliefs of East European Jewry and therefore a historically significant source for the understanding of the *dybbuk*.

My own interest in the *dybbuk* comes from my studies of Rabbi Hayyim Vital's mystical diary, *Sefer Hezyonot* (Book of Visions).⁴ Vital was the most important disciple of Rabbi Isaac Luria, the charismatic Safed kabbalist, and a central figure in the earliest accounts of *dybbuk* possession and exorcism that occurred in Safed in the second half of the sixteenth century. Vital's diary and his other writings were the most important primary sources for this phenomenon in Safed. Several years after publishing the English translation of Vital's diary, I edited and published a new Hebrew edition of the *Sefer Hezyonot*.⁵ During the years

that I worked on these editions I also published several articles relating to the *dybbuk* concept as it was found in Safed.⁶ This research motivated me to revisit the origins and history of the *dybbuk* and examine it afresh.

This project differs from most of what has been previously written on this subject in that I begin *ab initio* with a return to the original sources and endeavor to understand the concept of the *dybbuk* from its origins in Safed in the sixteenth century to its later historical evolution. Many of the basic questions about this subject have not been adequately dealt with in previous studies. Is the concept of the *dybbuk* based on earlier sources and concepts? Why did it appear in Safed and not before? What purpose did the *dybbuk* serve in Safed? Does the evidence validate the common assertion that women were the primary victims of *dybbuk* possession as has been assumed? What was the purpose of the *dybbuk* after Safed? How and why were *dybbuk* stories disseminated after Safed? Were the *dybbuk* stories in subsequent centuries records of actual events or fictional accounts published as “folktales” or for other reasons? What is the place of the *dybbuk* story in Hasidism? This study will attempt to answer these questions in a scholarly manner, without privileging any perspective that is not supported by the sources.

Much of what has been written about the *dybbuk* since Anski popularized the concept has taken his play as the starting point and has analyzed or discussed the concept through this prism. Studies of the play, its ideas, and its reception are beyond the purview of this study.⁷ The modern scholarly study of the history of the *dybbuk* begins with Gedaliah Nigal.⁸ He collected and published the texts of virtually all known *dybbuk* stories with important historical and bibliographical information. Nigal described the when, where, and how of the *dybbuk*, but he does not adequately explain the why. The first scholarly effort to provide a comprehensive understanding of the *dybbuk* in Safed is the monograph by J. H. Chajes.⁹ However, it is flawed by the author’s assumption that the *dybbuk* concept can be explained by reference to modern feminist interpretations, and his work is a brief in support of this contention. He does not seriously deal with alternative possible approaches to the question of the origins and meaning of the *dybbuk* concept. He begins his study with the appearance of the *dybbuk* in the sixteenth century and does not adequately examine the prehistory of the concept and the kabbalistic teachings that made it possible. To answer the basic question of why the *dybbuk* appears in the sixteenth century, he points to the supposed parallelism with the upsurge of witchcraft trials in Europe at

about the same time. The primary point of connection is that the two events are contemporaneous, and women are the focus in both cases. There are two obvious problems with this analysis. Witchcraft trials had been going on for a century before the appearance of the first *dybbuk*, and equally important, gender is not a factor in *dybbuk* possession. The distribution between men and women being possessed by *dybbukim* is roughly equivalent, as will be shown. Chajes ignores the stories about the possession of men and emphasizes the role of women. Additionally, there is no evidence that anyone in Safed was aware of the witchcraft persecutions in Europe or vice versa. Witches were possessed by the devil or Satan, and this phenomenon has been understood by modern scholars in terms of larger social and cultural issues and events that occurred over a long period of time and in many places. In addition, as will be discussed below, the concept of the *dybbuk* and possession by him is a uniquely Jewish phenomenon and has only the most surface relationship to the Christian concept of possession and its causes. These differences will be discussed in chapter 1. There is no evidence that *dybbuk* possession was a form of persecution of a group or a result of larger social issues. Rather, as we will demonstrate, the *dybbuk* is based on the concept of transmigration as it was developed in the medieval kabbalistic tradition. The concept of transmigration is rejected in the whole Christian tradition, Protestant and Catholic, and in the Sunni Islamic tradition. Second, the exorcism of a *dybbuk* was originally the purview of one person in Safed, Rabbi Isaac Luria. Rabbi Hayyim Vital, his disciple, was able to exorcise a *dybbuk* under the direction of Luria with difficulty. The competing exorcism story from Safed, by Elijah Falco, is problematic and will be discussed below in greater detail.

Sara Zfatman, a scholar of early modern Yiddish literature, has made a significant contribution to the reception history of the *dybbuk* concept. She studied several specific episodes of *dybbuk* possession in the second half of the seventeenth century in Central Europe but does not attempt to provide a comprehensive history or analysis of the concept. Her studies have been collected in an important monograph that will be discussed in its appropriate place in the reception history of the *dybbuk*.¹⁰

As a historian, I have not found social scientific approaches to the *dybbuk*, such as the anthropological approach of Yoram Bilu and the folkloristic methodology of Eli Yassif, to be helpful in answering the questions that concern me.¹¹ The methodological focus of this study is reception history. The basic questions will be historical and not literary

or involving other methodological approaches, such as philosophical, literary, or social scientific perspectives. Another lacuna in many previous studies is that they do not explain the context of the *dybbuk* story in its original setting. What purpose did it serve in Safed? Why does it first occur in Safed and not elsewhere or beforehand?

This work is divided into three sections. The first section explores the prehistory of the *dybbuk*. What are the sources in rabbinic and kabbalistic literature that lay the groundwork for the *dybbuk*? The rabbinic story of “Rabbi Akiva and the Dead Man” and the kabbalistic concept of transmigration are important foundations for its prehistory. The second section is devoted to Safed. The first *dybbuk* possession is recorded in Safed in 1571 and 1572. The first accounts of *dybbuk* possession in Safed were published during the first half of the seventeenth century. This section discusses the events in Safed and the reception history of the published accounts of the Safed events. The third section begins in the second half of the seventeenth century with accounts of *dybbuk* possession that share little with the Safed accounts beyond the basic idea that a person had been possessed by a *dybbuk* and needed to be exorcised. The main actors in these exorcisms were *ba’alei shem*, kabbalists who specialized in what is called “practical kabbalah,” the knowledge and use of Divine Names and other rituals that are often considered to be in the realm of magic. The name most often associated with the concept of a *ba’al shem* is Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism. Later generations of hasidic masters who followed in his footsteps were also reported to have exorcised *dybbukim* in the hagiographic literature of Hasidism.

Since my purpose is not to create an encyclopedic overview of every *dybbuk* story in the history of Judaism, but rather to indicate a new direction in understanding this phenomenon and its history, there are many *dybbuk* stories that have not been considered or discussed in this study. A significant category of stories that were not considered are hagiographic accounts that were recorded second or third hand and are part of the genre of miracle stories about holy men. A significant example are the exorcism stories in the hagiographical literature of Hasidism that were published from the middle of the nineteenth century until the first quarter of the twentieth century.

A note on the term *dybbuk*. The soul of the sinner condemned to *gilgul* (transmigration) was originally called an “evil Spirit” (*ruah rah*) in the early possession stories from Safed. This term can also refer to demons and other “spirits” found as early as the writings of Josephus and

continued to be mentioned in Jewish literature through the ages. These references to spirits or evil spirits have no connection to the *dybbuk* concept that is the concern of this study. Some authors who translated early texts have been known to change the term “evil Spirit” and use *dybbuk* in its place to make it more comprehensible to the modern reader. The most prominent example is Moses Gaster in his edition of the *Ma’aseh Book*. The title of the story in his collection is changed from “The Evil Spirit” to “The Dibbuk.”¹² It has been the conventional wisdom, based on the study of Gershom Scholem that the term *dybbuk*, derived from the Hebrew term *dybbuk* meaning “that which is attached,” began to be used instead of “evil Spirit” at the end of the seventeenth century.¹³ More recently, Sara Zfatman has demonstrated that this terminological transition took place later, in the first part of the eighteenth century. The first reference to the term *dybbuk* that she found is in a story of an exorcism in Speyer in 1715.¹⁴

All of the stories discussed in this study will be translated in full, from the primary sources cited, and all translations are my own unless otherwise noted. Many of them are not available in English translation or only short passages have been previously translated. The translations of the stories will appear in an appendix in the back. In several cases, I have translated multiple versions of a given story. The reason for this is that there are significant variations in the different versions that are worthy of consideration. In other places where a text is reprinted without significant variation, I cite the additional sources where the story is cited at the end of the translation of the story.